

Egypt too may blow up in our face

In February 1910, Ibrahim Nasif al-Wardani, a Muslim nationalist, assassinated Boutros Ghali, the Coptic Christian prime minister of Britain's puppet government in Egypt. This set off a wave of Coptic-Muslim confrontation followed by increased government repression of the nationalists.

It was not the first time the West intervened in Middle Eastern affairs. It was not the last time. Nor, if Egypt blows up in our face, will it be the first time there or in other parts of the Middle East that the West has reaped the whirlwind of its imperial ambitions.

As a professional historian and close follower of international affairs, I have to wonder at any nation's expectations of the long-run benefits of trying to manipulate the affairs of other peoples.

Apparently, George W. Bush genuinely believed that U.S. troops invading Iraq in 2003 would be received by cheering crowds comparable to the 1944 Allied liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation.

Incredibly delusional. The United States was the world's first modern democracy – our very real exceptionalism – but out of this reality at home has grown an essentially mythical self-perception as benevolent proponent of democracy and self-determination abroad.

While our methods today may be more covert, I find it hard to distinguish our pursuit of economic dominance and control from that of the British, the French, the Turks, the Arabs, the Romans, the Aztecs, the Greeks, the Persians or the Chinese.

In 1910, British Consul-General Sir Eldon Gorst "approved" Ghali's appointment. The Suez Canal, which the French built in their heyday, was now "protected" by the British

Soon after, in Iraq, the British fought the Turkish Empire, capturing Baghdad in 1917. With impressive foresight, the British civil commissioner warned that deep conflicts between Sunni, Shia and Kurds ensured the "antithesis of democratic government."

The British solution was the same in Iraq as in Egypt: appoint Christians to run the government. Rebellion broke out in 1920, taking a year to suppress at a cost of 2,000 British soldiers and 8,000 Iraqis killed or wounded.

During World War II, British and Soviet troops installed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as Shah of Iran, but in 1951, the Iranian people, in a democratic election, chose a secular nationalist, Mohammad Mossadegh, to lead the country.

Mossadegh introduced unemployment compensation and benefits for sick and injured workers as well as freeing peasants from forced labor on their landlords' estates. Then he nationalized the oil industry, controlled by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company – what eventually became British Petroleum and then BP.

On August 19, 1953, urged on by Britain's MI6, the CIA organized the overthrow of Mossadegh and the return of Shah Pahlavi. This coup strengthened the hand of Islamic militants over secular nationalists and laid the groundwork for Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Most Americans believe that Iran's 1979 revolution was an irrational product of Muslim extremism when in fact it was a direct product of the extremism of Western stupidity and arrogance.

If Abdel Nasser was to Egypt what Mossadegh was to Iran, the United States is in for another hard historical lesson. Following a 1952 revolution to overthrow Egypt's British-backed monarchy, Nasser was elected Egypt's second president in 1956.

Nasser introduced social reforms and challenged Israel, seen by Arabs as an instrument of Western power in the Middle East. When he nationalized the Canal in 1956, Israel, Britain and France invaded. In 1967, Nasser moved UN peacekeeping forces out of the Sinai and Egyptian troops to the Israeli border, touching off the "Six Day War."

Since Nasser's death in 1970, Anwar Al Sadat and Hosni Mubarak were Egypt's only presidents, Mubarak ruling with an iron hand in alliance with the United States since 1981.

The United States, cautious about the backfiring of whatever position it took, came to support Egypt's recent demonstrations for democracy, but it would be overly optimistic to assume that our past policies and actions will have no consequences.

If we believe there is no peace without justice and no justice without democracy and self-determination, the West has been too long on the wrong side of history.

I hope that Egypt's remarkably non-violent civilian revolution points to a positive outcome but history suggests it may also and again blow up in our face.