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**Vol. 8, No. 5, July 2020**

## **A National Hero or a Symbol of Oppression?**

### **Protesting the Statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps in Port Said**

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Since mid-June, there have been growing social media protests by residents of the city of Port Said, Egypt against the mayor's intention to reposition the statue of de Lesseps (1805-1894), a French engineer and statesman who initiated and led the Suez Canal excavation project. In their view, the statue symbolizes European colonialism and denigrates the blood of the Egyptian people who scarified their lives in a war against the oppressive colonialist enemy. The discourse reflects an ideological struggle over the interpretation of symbols and monuments in the public sphere and corresponds with similar protests that have taken place recently in several Western countries, with the resumption of riots against the murder of George Floyd, which highlights the phenomenon of tearing down statues identified as symbols of oppression.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In June-July, statues of Christopher Columbus accused of being responsible for European colonialism in the Americas were smashed in the United States.

In November 1899, a statue of de Lesseps was placed at the northern entrance of the Suez Canal in Port Said as a tribute to his part in its construction. At the end of the Sinai War (1956), the statue was smashed by an angry mob in protest of France's involvement in the war in favor of Israel. Since then, only the base of the statue has remained, and its ruined part has been preserved in the warehouses of the Suez Canal authorities. Occasionally, local authorities state their intention to restore the statue despite local opposition, as happened this past June, as the mayor declared that the statue had been restored by a French association.

Members of the Facebook group "Against the Return of the Statue to De Lesseps" (originally founded in 2009), which has more than 5,000 members among the residents of Port Said, explained their opposition to replacing the statue in light of its identification with colonialism. One Facebook user noted: "While the peoples of the [world] go out to revolution and overthrow statues symbolizing slavery, there are other people from Port Said who seek to restore the symbols of colonialism and the enslavement of humanity."<sup>2</sup> Former Egyptian Education Minister al-Hilal al-Sharbini wrote on his Facebook page that the logic of placing a statue of a man in a public space in recognition of his contribution to an engineering project is distorted. Based on this logic, European countries should be committed to constructing statues of Arab construction engineers as a tribute to their contribution to the construction work of the Canal. He offered to replace the statue of De Lesseps with a statue of the Egyptian peasant who dug the Canal and sacrificed his life for it.<sup>3</sup> The Egyptian Writers' Union has called on President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to intervene in the matter and prevent the statue from being placed so as not to hurt the national feelings of the Egyptians. Instead, they proposed to place a statue that would symbolize the national struggle of the Egyptian people against colonialism.<sup>4</sup>

Some took a harsher tone when they accused De Lesseps of treason. This is given his

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<sup>2</sup> [@Xdelesebs](#), Facebook.com, 20 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> [@Prof.Hilaly](#), Facebook.com, 27 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> [@enaguib2013](#), Facebook.com, 5 July 2020.

collaboration with the Egyptian governor, Ismail Pasha, who was perceived as a "puppet" of Britain, and hence to be accused of a pro-British tendency and of even aiding the British conquest of Egypt. De Lesseps was also accused of turning his back on the "revolution" of the Egyptian officer Ahmad al-'Urabi (1879-1882), who rebelled against the European interference in Egypt. A trader from Port Said exceeded this, as he stated that he intended to file a lawsuit against the Egyptian Ministry of Education for spreading a false narrative in elementary school textbooks, describing De Lesseps' character in a positive light. He called on parents to burn the books and educate their children that De Lesseps was a traitor.<sup>5</sup>



***An image uploaded by an Egyptian Facebook user from Port Said on the displacement of a statue of the English slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, England, by an angry mob, intended to criticize Egypt's intention to return the statue of de Lesseps, [Facebook](#), July 20, 2020***

<sup>5</sup> [@fahmyawad.sakr](#), Facebook.com, 15 July 2020.

Despite the sweeping opposition, some found it appropriate to support the restoration of the statue, mainly due to the economic benefits inherent in doing so, in addition to the recognition of the contribution of colonialism to the development of the state.<sup>6</sup> A resident of Port Said stressed that the supreme national interest is the development of the economy, especially because of the fact that the city is currently under economic stagnation. In his view, the return of the statue could be an attraction for millions of French tourists, and a catalyst for the development of trade and employment in the city. He argued that any opposition to this intention might damage the city's economic development and the well-being of its residents, saying that without the Suez Canal "there would have been no cities like Port Said and Ismailia, and there would have been no dam."<sup>7</sup> In the eyes of another resident of the city, de Lesseps was a simple official who followed the instructions of the Egyptian governor, and Britain did not ask for his help in occupying Egypt, and so he was not betraying anyone.<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenon of removing or smashing statues, which are perceived as symbols of oppression, racism and slavery, is not restricted to Egypt. Recently, other Arab states have witnessed this as well, in what appears to be part of a global protest movement. In Morocco, for example, there is a growing demand for the removal of the statue of the general and former governor of Morocco, Hubert Lyautey (1854-1934), from the French consulate in Casablanca, claiming that the statue is a symbol of French colonialism.<sup>9</sup> In northern Sudan, citizens are demanding the removal of the name of the street "al-Zubayr Pasha" (1830-1913) in Khartoum. It was named after Sudanese Governor al-Zubayr Rahma Mansour, who ruled

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<sup>6</sup> [@100000865228085](#), Facebook.com, 5 July 2020.

<sup>7</sup> [@aboayadmohamed](#), Facebook.com, 28 June 2020.

<sup>8</sup> [@533009140373214](#), Facebook.com, 17 July 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See for example an electronic petition imbued with sarcasm signed by more than 500 Moroccans who have demanded to replace the statue with a Grendizer statue, an image of a robot taken from a Japanese comic: "[Replace the statue of lyautey in casablanca with Grendizer](#)", *Change*, 15 June 2020; "[Retrait de la statue de Lyautey du sol marocain](#)", *Change*, 20 June 2020; [@nabiluus](#), Facebook.com, 15 June 2020.

the country in the mid-19th century and was also a slave trader.<sup>10</sup>

Protests in Egypt, Morocco and northern Sudan, as well as some Western countries, illustrate the growing civic involvement in shaping collective memory. The redefining of national symbols is being done through the denial of narratives that glorify the contribution of colonialism and local elites identified with it, and the cultivation of competing narratives that emphasize the contribution of the local common people to the success of the nation-state. Thanks to social media, a major field of discussion has opened up for ordinary citizens in Arab countries, and now they are allowed to challenge the dominant interpretation of the political elite.

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<sup>10</sup> [@alfadil.alnour](#), Facebook.com, 8 June 2020; [@osama.saad.12764](#), facebook.com, 14 June 2020.