

The charismatic leadership of gamal abdel nasser essay sample

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Introduction

Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) was an inspiration for the Arabs. As a charismatic political leader of Egypt, he was an influential agent of social change (“Gamal,” 2005; Dawisha, 2003; Fiol, Harris, & House, 1999). As a matter of fact, he is known to have been the first Arab leader to challenge Western rule in the Middle East (Trueman, 2007). He played a significant role in uniting the Arabs under the banner of Nasserism, which was a secular and anti-imperialist sociopolitical ideology. A hero for the Arab world, he also opposed the rigidity of the Cold War’s bipolar world (“Gamal”). Nasser’s reputation reached an all-time high in the year 1958 when Egypt and Syria were united as the United Arab Republic (Dawisha). He continues to be remembered as a savior by the Arab world and the Egyptians (Trueman). Indeed, the reputation that the man enjoys belongs especially to charismatic leaders.

Gamal Abdel Nasser: A Charismatic Leader

By uniting the Arabs, Nasser had shown that his character traits were those of charismatic leaders: he had the ability to make a consequential emotional impact on his followers; and he could elevate the self-confidence and the self-image of his followers by arousing their emotional attachment to the values he championed apart from the collective interests. Thus, he was able to create strong follower commitment to the Arab people’s goals by emotionally and intellectually connecting them to his followers’ personal goals (Javidan & Waldman, 2003).

Charismatic leaders are further known to foster social relationships with their followers. Such relationships motivate followers to perform brilliantly with a positive attitude. Followers of charismatic leaders also feel more secure, despite the fact that charismatic leadership is marked by risk-taking on the part of the leader. Most importantly, as in the case of Nasser, the followers of such leaders are known to have high self-esteem (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). Thus, history has revealed that the followers of Nasser were not only able to free themselves from the dominance of the Westerners with the belief that they were capable of governing themselves, but they also formed an Arab union (in the name of the United Arab Republic) that permitted them to strengthen their ties among themselves (“Gamal”).

Nasser expressed to his followers that he was absolutely united with them. He also achieved a great deal in terms of reforms during his regime. Industrialization, mobilization of his people, and a wide range of social measures were a part and parcel of his charismatic leadership, which is typically characterized by high performance in any case (Erhart & Klein). Moreover, the man disliked violence, which is one of the main reasons why he continues to be loved by the Arabs in our times (“Gamal”). In point of fact, charismatic leaders such as Nasser, Gandhi, the Buddha, Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr. have always been admired for their refined characters (Javidan & Waldman).

According to a BBC report, the Arab people continue to miss Nasser: On 23 July 1952, a group of military men known as the Free Officers seized power in Egypt, toppling the British-backed monarchy and setting the country on a

new political path. It was the first time Egypt had been ruled by Egyptians for two and a half millennia. The country had been conquered by a succession of foreigners – Persians, Greeks, Romans, Circassians, Arabs, Turks and finally the British. So Gamal Abdul Nasser, and the other young army officers, won huge popular acclaim when they ended the much-resented domination of the British, ejected the effete and pleasure-loving King Farouq and turned the country into a republic. ...Throughout the 1950s and 1960s and until his death in 1970, [Nasser] dominated Arab politics and the popular imagination of the Arab masses. He was an electrifying speaker. Crowds hung on his every word. He embodied pan-Arabism – the dream of a united Arab nation stretching from the Atlantic to the Gulf. His message, of social justice at home and anti-colonialism abroad, restored Arab dignity. Today, when many Arabs feel humiliated by Israel and the American superpower, there is a certain nostalgia for Nasserism (Hardy, 2002).

Both Dawisha and Dekmejian (1971) confirm that Nasser was a true charismatic leader. According to Dekmejian, his was a “revolutionary career based on charismatic leadership – a highly spiritual interaction between leader and followers rivaled only by two figures in Arab history – Salah el-Din and the Prophet Mohammed.” Closely connected to this idea is the fact that Nasser was able to inspire his people to love him when his officers practiced complete non-violence while assuming power in the year 1952 – without firing a single shot – the way Prophet Mohammed and his followers had conquered Mecca with absolute non-violence (Sherman, 1957).

Max Weber, the originator of the concept of charismatic leadership, would have agreed that the spiritual connection between the leader and his followers was a genuine one. In point of fact, Weber had believed that the charismatic leader such as Nasser must possess supernatural gifts of the spirit as well as the body that comprise extraordinary qualities and attributes (Javidan & Waldman). This also happens to be the crux of the 'Great Man' debate, emphasizing that the charismatic leader must possess innate leadership abilities. In other words, leaders such as Nasser are born rather than made by the needs of the time (Callan, 2003).

A charismatic leader must, moreover, possess high emotional intelligence. In order to move the crowds the way he did, Nasser had to look to the vast range of motivations that moved his Arab followers. He was a breakthrough agent, and therefore had to possess high emotional understanding so as to inspire his followers to accept his difficult goals as their own (Callan). After all, he was promising better outcomes and opportunities to his followers, regardless of the difficulty of the political course they were required to pursue alongside their leader. His vision was based on the premise that his nation was not achieving its potential and somehow needed to be different. In order to follow his vision, he naturally had to assess the environmental opportunities in addition to constraints. The assessment had to be realistic, of course, in order for the vision of Nasser to be considered achievable by his followers (Javidan & Waldman).

Nasser happened to be a spokesperson for the Arab world. He was not the first person to create Arab nationalism. Instead, he is known to have been

the “ most effective exponent” of it (Torrey, 1965). Nasser was able to personify the “ Arab longings for unity and acceptance as equals by the world (Torrey).” Hence, his relationship with his followers was as close as it should be for a charismatic leader. He believed in the dignity of his people, and therefore made continuous references to Arab dignity and Arab rights (Torrey). In fact, his focus on the dignity of his people is one of the chief reasons that he is known to have been a charismatic leader.

So as to be effective as a charismatic leader, Nasser had to be sensitive to the abilities as well as concerns of his followers (Javidan & Waldman). The following excerpt from his biography sheds light not only on his innate leadership abilities, but also on the fact that he was more sensitive than the others about the needs of the people that he associated with:

As early as his grammar school years, he participated in demonstrations against the English occupation of Egypt. In 1937 he entered the military academy at Cairo; he left the following year with the rank of second lieutenant.

In 1943, after several years of service in Upper Egypt and the Sudan, he became an instructor at the military academy and then at the army staff college. During 1948-1949 he took part in the unsuccessful campaign against the new state of Israel. In this conflict he commanded a position from the pocket of Faludja, south-west of Jerusalem, where three Egyptian battalions were surrounded for more than 2 months by Israeli forces. Nasser resisted gallantly with his troops until the cease-fire was declared. This was

the only comparatively successful Arab exploit of the war. For many years Nasser had been in contact with some of the army officers who were indignant over the corruption in the royal Egyptian government. These young radicals were strongly nationalistic, but they could not agree on an ideology or on an alliance with other forces. However, under the impact of the defeat by Israel in Palestine, the secret movement of free officers was organized (1949), with Nasser as one of the principal founders. This group overthrew King Farouk on July 23, 1952 ("Gemal").

The commitment and attachment shown by Nasser's followers to the picture of the envisioned future depended on the degree of their identification with their leader, his credibility, and the vision itself (Javidan & Waldman). Nasser was an "electrifying speaker," and so he built his credibility – as do most charismatic leaders – by communicating and articulating why there was a need for a breakthrough and how it could be accomplished (Hardy).

According to Javidan & Waldman, charismatic leaders must explain the need for change by magnifying the principle forces that are driving the change, and articulating how and why the environmental changes would not accept the status quo. They also convince their followers that the breakthrough would be the best way to position the group within its situational context (Javidan & Walman). It can be assumed that Nasser was able to communicate with his followers in a similar manner.

Like the other charismatic leaders, Nasser appeared credible because he was able to convince his followers of his own enthusiasm, motivation, and commitment. His actions as well as decisions were known to have been

consistent with his vision for his people. He modeled the appropriate behaviors to reveal how the vision could be accomplished. He also engaged in behaviors that were innovative and oft unconventional (Javidan & Waldman). As an example, when Egypt planned to construct an iron and steel mill for an estimated cost of \$48, 000, 000; it was Nasser who opened the plant with great enthusiasm three years later at a total cost of \$78, 500, 000 (Wheelock, 1960). Conger & Kanungo (1998) confirm that it is possible for charismatic leaders to make flawed decisions. In their book, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*, the authors especially present examples of charismatic leaders that make bad business decisions.

It is possible that charismatic leaders sometimes make bad business decisions because of their high risk-taking trait. Nevertheless, Nasser was able to maintain his credibility by taking actions that supported his vision. He introduced educated officers' corps in his nation, and Egypt experienced an educational boom during his regime. The intellectuals working for Nasser were able to arouse public awareness in addition to enthusiasm. Thus, Nasser was able to maintain his charisma in the eyes of his followers especially because of his efforts to enlighten his people (Sherman).

At the time of Nasser, Egypt was also able to commence land reform, an idea that had been completely rejected by the governments before he came to power. While the peasants were reconciled to the vision of Nasser, Egypt was able to establish new social classes during his regime (Sherman). The concept of Arab socialism introduced by Nasser included social justice, state ownership of the principle means of production, the leveling of people's

incomes, an increase in foreign trade and governmental programs for development (Torrey). With all of these plans, Nasser carried the Arab people's best interests at heart. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the people of the Arab world perceived this as a good time for Egypt. Nasser was able to elicit high performance from his followers. Similar to other charismatic leaders, he would often go the extra mile for their collective interests. His followers could tell that he was not self-centered. Rather, Nasser was perceived as a leader of good character, which happens to be one of the most desirable attributes not only for charismatic leaders around the world but especially for political leaders in the Muslim world. Moreover, like other charismatic leaders, Nasser possessed self-awareness, self-control, and a need for power ("Charismatic," 1999). This is revealed through the large number of leadership roles that he assumed during his lifetime.

Nasser's Aswan High Dam project along with its land reclamation scheme continues to be remembered by the Egyptians as a symbol of progress (Torrey). The goal of the project was poverty eradication (Wheelock). Nasser had established this goal out of his concern for his people, which is undoubtedly a vital characteristic of charismatic leadership.

Conclusion

Charismatic leadership is always marked by new ideas that have never been tried and tested before. The projects undertaken by Nasser, such as the nationalization of Suez Canal, undoubtedly reveal that the man had set out to do things for his people that had never been imagined before ("Nasserist

Rule,” 2002). No wonder, he is known as a “charismatic figure” in most of the literature about him, including encyclopedias (“Nasser,” 2007). As a charismatic leader, he helped his people to regain their dignity and rights in face of Western dominance. He had formed a close bond with his followers, which permitted him to easily convince his people that their interests were his own. By unifying the Arab people for some time, under the banner of the United Arab Republic, the man was seen to further strengthen his bond with his people.

Nasser continues to be remembered as a hero among the Arab people. He saved the Egyptians from Western domination, and enlightened his people to boot. His regime accompanied an educational boom in Egypt, in addition to social reforms that carried the interests of his people at heart. Nasser communicated his vision effectively. Moreover, he was seen as a man of good character, who disliked violence. It has been written that he shared a spiritual connection with his followers. For this reason, he has been compared to Prophet Muhammad.

Nasser was able to inspire his people to increase their productivity during his regime. He was also able to challenge the status quo for desired social change. Thus, all essential character traits of charismatic leaders have been shown to belong to Nasser. He continues to be remembered as a highly respected figure in the Arab world – a fact that testifies to the lastingness of his charisma.

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