

6. The Tenancy Web and the Vocabulary of Dissent

6.1 Introduction

Any conflict that concerned legal restrictions imposed by the state, such as the new tenancy law, inevitably involved local practices of power in El Bîr. However, as Zayed pointed out, even official institutions, such as the elected local council and various agencies (e.g. the CDA or the Agricultural Cooperative) did not interfere with the village's affairs, in a way that would "establish an official frame for all the issues being raised"¹. In this chapter, it will be shown that the differentiation between 'tenants' and 'owners' was never as clear-cut as it was made out to be by both opponents and supporters of Law 96. Indeed many farmers responded to the changes in an extremely ambivalent manner as their definitions of tenants and owners shifted, depending on the specific circumstances and individuals referred to. This meant that there was less likelihood of there being outright confrontation between those who benefited from Law 96 and those who did not. As Scott pointed out, in the 'setting for conflict between winners and losers', the parties to the conflict are all *bricoleurs* with a given set of tools or a set of variations on themes'. And it is the way in which certain expectations are defined by the actors which forms the substance of the drama.² Moreover, to quote Mitchell, 'the impact of Law 96 also varied with the factors and forces it interacted with, especially those of local family power'.³

As indicated in Chapter 5, it was often to the benefit of El Bîr's inhabitants to maintain harmonious relations with their relatives, neighbours, and various influential members of the community. Therefore, feelings of anger or betrayal related to the changes in the status quo were expressed through more subtle means of dissent, or by focusing attention on the government's failure in general to deliver its developmental promises. The extent to which the ensuing vocabulary of dissent may be viewed as an active form of 'resistance' on the part of the fellahin is a moot point. One of the major criticisms of

¹ He also pointed out that "Practice of power at this level contradicts with the interests of the state and overlaps with regional politics." (Zayed 1998, pp. 374, 375)

² Scott 1985, p. 198

³ Mitchell 2002, p. 265

much recent work on ‘peasant resistance’, as Saad notes, is that there has been a ‘tendency to seek and glorify acts of resistance, perhaps beyond what is politically sensible’.⁴ Therefore, although this chapter refers to Scott’s well-known interpretation of local power practices at the village level, the emphasis here is not so much on ‘everyday forms of resistance’, but rather on ‘everyday forms of existence’ as Fegan termed it.⁵ Or what Bayat defined as the process of ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’, that is, the “silent, protracted, pervasive advancement of ordinary people – through open-ended and fleeting struggles without clear leaderships, ideology or structured organisation – on the propertied and powerful in order to survive”.⁶

6.2 Tit for Tat: ‘You Were the Boss and Now I Am the Boss’

It emerged during discussions with the inhabitants of El Bîr that there was a strong feeling of ‘tit for tat’ in the wake of Law 96’s implementation. That is, the owners had been treated unfairly before 1997, and now the tenants were the ones being treated unfairly. For example, one man told a neighbouring farmer during a heated discussion, “You were bossing me around and now I am going to boss you around”.⁷ Bach noted similar dynamics in the Upper Egyptian village of her case study. One of her respondent’s stated: “Before the law the owners kept something in their heart against the tenant, now the tenant keeps something in his heart against the owner.”⁸ Yet many farmers expressed equivocal views about the issue, because of the complex nature of the tenancy relations in which they had engaged previously; that is, they had been both tenants and owners at the same time. One farmer in El Bîr summarised the ambiguous feelings he had about the law as follows:

“They should have raised the rents a bit. There could have been a compromise... the owner should have felt free in his own land; to be able to sell it or keep it, or change tenants, but there should have been freedom on both sides. The tenants were mistaken in asking for half

⁴ Saad 2004, p. 12. The danger of romanticising the actions taken by the powerless has been critiqued by Lila Abu-Lughod (see her article in the *American Ethnologist* 1990).

⁵ See Scott (1985) and Fegan (1986)

⁶ Bayat 1997, p. 5

⁷ Interview no. 19. In subsequent discussions with this particular group of mainly tenant farmers, it emerged that the one who made the provocative statement quoted above, considered himself ‘to be above the others’, because he owned land.

⁸ Bach 2002, p. 179

of the revenue, if the owner decided to sell the land. But the government should have stayed neutral and not given control to one party or another, as the owner was resentful when he came back to take his land.”⁹

As this excerpt illustrates, people had criticisms to make about the previous state of affairs, yet they felt that the tenants had genuinely suffered under the new law. The notion of the tenant now being in an unfair position (*mazlum*: literally ‘an injustice has been done to him’ or ‘he is oppressed’) was referred to on many occasions. For example, in the words of one smallholder, “The class of people, I mean the tenants... these were the ones who were really harmed by the law.”¹⁰ Indeed, since Law 96’s implementation, agricultural land rents had soared and this had caused much hardship for resource-poor farmers in El Bîr. The annual rents for the year of 2001–2002 were on average between LE 1560 and LE 1680/feddan, depending on the kind of land and the amount asked by the individual owner. And both cooperative employees and farmers stated that the new annual rents for the beginning of the agricultural year in October 2002 would go up to LE 2400/2640 per feddan. By contrast, rents had ranged between LE 432 and LE 600/feddan in the early nineties before Law 96 was introduced.¹¹ This meant that in the five years since the implementation of Law 96 annual rents had quadrupled (if one considers the highest figure given for pre-1997 and the lowest figure given for the year of 2002–2003).¹²

Tenants who had not been able to afford the higher rents in El Bîr had either taken up agricultural wage labour or, if they were still young and healthy, sought employment outside the village: “Many of the tenants who left the land in 1997 have become wage

⁹ Interview no. 18. The practice of giving the tenant half or a third of the revenue from a land sale, although not stipulated specifically by Law 178, had become ‘*urfi* (customary) over the last fifty years. The owner could not sell his land until an agreement was reached with the tenant, and this often led to the tenant receiving a proportion of the selling price of the land (see Bush 2002, p. 20).

¹⁰ Interview no. 21. One old farmer who had to leave all the land he rented under the old law, but still considered himself lucky to own 8 qirats, stated, “*da kaan zulm gamid* [this was a strong form of oppression]” (Interview no. 32).

¹¹ These figures coincided with the official rates provided by the cooperative employees. According to a number of sources, the rents increased to LE 1920/feddan immediately after October 1997 and then decreased to LE 1560 or LE 1680/feddan.

¹² Many farmers also paid seasonal rents to owners. For example, in the winter of 2001/2002, one qirat of *birseem* was rented out for LE 35, while the new rents were going to go up to LE 60 to LE 70/qirat in the winter of 2002/2003. In the winter of 2002, one cut of *birseem* was selling at LE 20 and one qirat yielded 4 or 5 cuts in a season. Without including production costs, farmers could make around LE 55 per qirat after paying the rent. Therefore, *birseem* prices would have to double in the new season for farmers to continue making a reasonable profit.

labourers”; “The new factories provided jobs. Those who had to leave the land looked for work in the factories.”¹³ For example, twenty out of three hundred tenants in a nearby hamlet who had to leave their land in 1997 found jobs in the Tenth of Ramadan, while others found work in a wholesale manufacturer of household appliances. On the one hand, people pointed out that the new jobs created in industrial cities nearby had helped to address the issue of rising unemployment: “The Tenth of Ramadan City solved the complexes of the young”; “In El Bîr, there isn’t so much envy, because people can always go and work somewhere, there are opportunities. Nobody has taken anything from anyone here.”¹⁴

Other interviewees, however, expressed deep scepticism about the ability of the state to create more employment: “I heard that they will close down twenty-five percent of the factories in the Tenth of Ramadan. Where will these people go? They talk about ‘terrorists’, well, this is what will happen to those people”.¹⁵ Moreover, it was clear that landowners were taking full advantage of the new reality of ‘supply and demand’, as one interviewee explained: “Some lands were left fallow when tenants had to give the land back, because they couldn’t pay the new rents. So the landlords lowered the prices to get other tenants, then as soon as the land was being cultivated, they would raise the rents and the tenants lost out again.”¹⁶

In the meantime, there were also many small owners who had been renting in land under the old law, who, likewise, found themselves in straightened circumstances, as the following comments show: “If a fellah owned one feddan and was renting in one feddan and he couldn’t afford the new rent, he would stop renting the land and do more wage labour”; “Those who couldn’t afford the new rents in the Coptic lands left it and are now farming whatever owned land they have. They supplement their income through wage labour”.¹⁷ Such statements contradict the conclusions of the APRP study conducted in 1997, which underlined that ‘more than two-thirds of total agricultural

¹³ Interviews no. 3, 13

¹⁴ Interview no. 39

¹⁵ Interview no. 1

¹⁶ Interview no. 5. In the words of another villager, “The owners are keeping an eye out for the rents. When they realised that their tenants were making good money, they raised the rents once more.” (Interview no. 32)

¹⁷ Interviews no. 24, 18

land is farmed by owners... thus, the number of people ‘losing’ in the short term from the new law is far lower than the number who receive immediate benefits.’¹⁸ The fact that there were many owner-tenants, as well as pure tenants, let alone a high proportion of landless fellahin, is not taken into account by the authors. Furthermore, they do not consider that other major productivity constraints, such as the removal of subsidised inputs may have prevented small farmers from reaping the benefits of greater access to land. A person may own land, but be too poor to farm it.

In fact, the majority of interviewees in El Bîr believed that since the implementation of Law 96, the only way to continue farming in a profitable manner was to own land and to have sons to assist in the work, in addition to some kind of second income if possible.¹⁹ This is indicated by the following comments: “Now people are running from the land. If a man doesn’t have sons to help him out on the land, it’s not worth it”; “Those who can afford to farm are the ones who are farming now, but only those with a second income”; “If you can farm because you own the land, it is worth it, but for the tenants it is no longer worthwhile”.²⁰ It is clear from these statements that the options currently available to farmers who did not own any land were limited. One young woman observed, “The untying of the Law affected a lot of people in the village. Many tenants couldn’t pay the new rents, so they left the land. This new law was not well-thought out at all. There is a lot of unemployment here now.” And in the words of another interviewee: “It is natural that all of the tenants left... the fellahin are dying out and there will come a day when you won’t find anyone to work the land, as it is no longer a means of security for those who don’t own land. Tenants have to find jobs for their children these days. They can’t rely on the produce from the land. But in order to volunteer your son in the army, you need *wasta* [an intermediary].”²¹

¹⁸ USAID 1997, p. 1

¹⁹ At the same time, Bach found that in her case study in the Delta, most tenants who voluntarily abandoned their land were not full-time farmers, but government employees with a second income. With the increase in rent, it was cheaper for them to buy food than to produce it themselves; whereas full-time farmers had no alternative other than to accept the higher rents. (Bach 2002, p. 172)

²⁰ Interviews no. 6, 11, 36. Other interviewees made similar comments: “Self-sufficiency is very important these days. I found that it was more profitable to farm the land myself”; “If a fellah has land and owns it he can survive, but only if he is working the land himself”; “The land costs too much money to cultivate alone, you have to have sons”. (Interviews no. 1, 16, 20)

²¹ Interviews no. 1, 4

And despite the fact that many villagers emphasised the relatively smooth transition of Law 96, they did not deny the plight of many tenant farmers. One interviewee pointed out that “Nowadays, tenant farmers cannot afford to stock their crop, so they have indebted themselves to traders and to landowners.”²² In particular, concern was expressed for older tenants with dependents, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Just this week, someone in El Bîr bought 2 feddans and they told the four families farming on this land to leave. What will they do? One of these tenants is an old man who has been farming all his life. How will he find work? It is difficult for the tenants, as the rent is so much higher, but the owners want to farm their lands now with their children.”²³

Yet the interviewee concluded here that, although tenant farmers were currently struggling, the owners were justified because they ‘wanted to farm their lands now with their children’. Scott pointed out that in Sedaka a common excuse given by a landlord for evicting tenants was his duty to his children. He would present his case to the tenant by pointing out that he had no choice other than to increase the rent, because his son needed the money, or he could argue that he had been ‘too generous’ in the past, or that the tenant had to leave the land because his sons wanted to farm it. In this way, the landlord could keep up appearances in the eyes of the village community, even if the tenant in question did not believe a word of his hard-luck story.²⁴ There were similar incidences of face-saving behaviour on the part of owners in El Bîr when they ‘asked’ tenants to leave the land. If the excuse of needing the land for one’s children was given by an owner, the tenant could hardly defame the actions of the latter publicly, even if he knew the reality to be otherwise.

Nevertheless, many villagers believed that the new tenancy law could have been implemented differently, whether they had benefited from it or not. They felt that land rents should have been increased gradually, instead of doubling or trebling overnight: “They should have put up the rent bit by bit, like they did with the salaries of government employees. It would have been fairer if they had raised the rents to LE 1000 and not to LE 1680 per feddan”; “There could have been a compromise. The rents

²² Interview no. 3

²³ Interview no. 4

²⁴ Scott 1985, p. 211

could have been increased to LE 50/qirat, for example [i.e. LE 1200/feddan]”.²⁵ And one young woman pointed out, “The right of every tenant should be to have a profit margin at the end of the year. If the rent is too high or the prices are too low, the tenant cannot cover his costs. The right of a tenant is to pay the same rent as his neighbours.”²⁶ Even the official rent paid to the landowner in accordance with the old law had differed from the actual rent paid. A common practice for landowners to evade the rent ceiling had been to sign a lease wherein the legal rent would be stated, but tenants would then be compelled to sign separate bills of exchange for the extra amount. Landowners also evaded their legal obligations by shifting the burden of the land tax and other costs onto their tenants. This was the case with several tenant farmers interviewed in El Bîr.²⁷

In the meantime, the notion of land ownership itself had changed in the last five years, depending on whether one was a tenant or an owner, or both. For example, one owner stated: “For those who own it, the land is more valuable now. *El melk* [owned land] is like my own son. I can really feel the taste of what I am eating... If I were a tenant, I would leave the land to go work somewhere else”. And from a tenant’s point of view: “Owned land with this government is difficult”.²⁸ The implication here is that owning land was now much harder because, under the old law, tenants were *virtual* or *de facto* owners. Tenancy contracts were inheritable from one generation to the next, while both tenants and owners were registered at the local cooperative on a *hiyaza* or landholding card. Since October 1997, however, tenants were no longer registered as having a *hiyaza*, which used to entitle them to seasonal input loans, credit and marketing services from the cooperative.

Indeed, some people felt that ownership was defined essentially by the *hiyaza* (registered landholding): “It does not make a difference whether you own the land or not... I told you that before already. As long as I pay the rent and I have paid the rent here for the last thirty years, I represent the owner while I am on this land. But the *hiyaza* is for the owner. It is the best thing for him to have. It is all he hopes for. Some

²⁵ Interviews no. 5, 21. Another farmer stated, “They should have raised the rent gradually from LE 600 to 800 to 1000, instead of putting it up that much all in one go.” (Interview no. 12)

²⁶ Interviews no. 23, 46

²⁷ Abdel-Fadil 1975, p. 54; see also Bush 2002, p. 27.

²⁸ Interviews no. 19, 26

people have it in their blood to have *hiyaza*, and they would even sell their own clothes if it would get them more *hiyaza*.”²⁹ Thus many villagers felt that the registered landholding or *hiyaza* should have remained in the name of the tenant, as proof of collateral was currently the only way for small farmers to obtain bank loans³⁰. This is indicated by the following comments: “The tenant’s only capital these days is what he grows on the land. They should have raised the rents, but kept the status quo in terms of the *hiyaza*”; “The fellah is like a tree that you cut down and do not replace with another one.”³¹

And although there had been a marked depreciation of land prices in the last five years,³² the majority of smallholders still could not afford them since the cost of living had risen disproportionately to the income they earned. As one inhabitant explained:

“In the past, land was not a commodity [*min zamân mafish sel’a*]. Land was rare so the prices were high, but when they took away the Law in 1997³³, the owners couldn’t believe they got their land back and they wanted to sell it immediately. The old owners had died, so the children who inherited the land sold it if they could, as they had no connection to it. That is why land prices went down right after the law. There was so much supply. Now seventy percent of the land in El Bîr is on the market and it is completely worthless.”³⁴

Therefore, despite the fact that one of the aims of Law 96 had been to ‘create a healthy land market’, there was still far more supply than demand in El Bîr. Many fellahin criticised the new status quo because landlords were renting out land more than ever before, as this was more profitable than farming it themselves. And as the rents were currently less affordable, owners were renting out smaller and smaller plots of land. One farmer explained, “After 1997, owners sold their land and put the money in the bank, or

²⁹ Interview no. 23

³⁰ The current non-registration of contracts between tenants and owners means that tenants have no formal evidence of collateral for loans (Bush 2002, p. 197).

³¹ Interviews no. 3, 4

³² The average price of land in El Bîr for the year 2002 was LE 53,760/feddan. Once Law 96 came into force, prices dropped sharply from LE 72,000/feddan to LE 38,400/feddan. This was due to the fact that many owners feared that the new law would be reverted, so they sold their land immediately.

³³ It should be noted here that any mention of agrarian reform during discussions with villagers was taken as referring to Nasser’s Reform or *islâh*. Law 96, on the other hand, was always talked about as ‘the untying or undoing of the Law’ (i.e. Nasser’s *islâh*), whether people agreed with its implications or not. Saad pointed out that the 1992 amendment to Law 178, known as ‘the law for regulating the relationship between owner and tenant’ was dubbed by its opponents as ‘the law for throwing out tenants from their land’. (Saad 1998, p. 387)

³⁴ Interview no. 40. In the words of another farmer, “The owners came back after the new law and since they finally had access to their land, they wanted to sell it immediately.” (Interview no. 17)

they rented the land out to new tenants. We used to rent in 3 feddans, but now that same plot has been rented out to seven or eight different tenants, so the owners are not consolidating their land.”³⁵ And in the words of two other interviewees, “Nowadays, land is more fragmented than ever, because farmers are renting in smaller and smaller pieces of land”; “If the justification for the law was to consolidate land, this has not happened here... landowners who live in the cities do not want to get into farming.”³⁶ In this way, the prime beneficiaries of increased rents were the absentee landlords, as will be described in further detail in the following sections.

However, the villagers pointed out simultaneously that the owners had been in an ‘unjust position in the equation’ (*mutazalim*) and therefore, they had ‘presented their case to the lawmakers’.³⁷ Or as one interviewee expressed it,

“The owner was in an unfair situation when the rents were fixed at such a low rate. I remember scolding a tenant once, as I came out of the mosque after the Prayer. He was renting in 2 feddans on Giddu Hamdy’s land and his cousin wanted to marry his son off, so he needed to sell a feddan. The tenant was going to take half of his revenue from the sale, so I said to him after the Prayer, ‘How can you take half the share of something that does not belong to you? This is bullying. Is it your land that you inherited?’”³⁸

The fact that owners were “bullied” by their tenants tended to be highlighted inevitably by those who had taken their land back. For example, many of the small owners expressed bitterness about the way in which tenants had profited from the situation of low rents, by subleasing plots to other farmers in the following manner: “A tenant, with only two or three mouths to feed could get five feddans and then sublease one feddan on the black market for twice the fixed rent. He wouldn’t give access to the land to those who had seven mouths to feed. They were paying nothing to the owners and making

³⁵ Interview no. 1

³⁶ Interviews no. 5, 9. Bush pointed out that ‘the consolidation of landholdings argued by reformers as another desired outcome of the reform does not seem to have taken place’ (Bush 2002, p. 20). And according to Abdel Aal, the only form of consolidation that had occurred in the years following Law 96’s introduction, had been the consolidation of wealth (Interview conducted on 20th April 2003).

³⁷ Interview no. 12

³⁸ Interview no. 48

money for themselves...”³⁹ Another villager presented his views on the issue in the following manner:

Ustâz Gamal: “There were owners who were *muahddamîn* [very poor] before... The Law was unjust for the owners. Now, if the fellahin want to farm, including those who don’t own any land, they have to go and get land for the same price.”

Researcher: “But what about the tenants whose livelihood depended entirely upon the land they were renting before 1997? They had to leave and now they have nothing.”

Ustâz Gamal: “They got a five-year transitional period. The new law was in favour of the owner. As a result of the Revolution, tenants were given the land and they lived off it for fifty years *bibalesh* [for free]. They got a free education and they paid very little rent... so the new law was just.”⁴⁰

The notion that the fixed rent under the old law had been ‘too low’ or ‘for free’ was referred to often. By contrast, some interviewees believed that the income of small resident owners had improved considerably during the last five years. This is indicated by the following comments: “Under the old law, the owner was afraid that the tenant would just stay forever”; “For the owners it was good, because before they could not even sell their land, but now they are free to do what they want with it”; “It is a little bit more expensive for us now, but more comfortable in the end, because we have access to land”.⁴¹ One farmer stated:

“Lifting the law was very fair... the small owners are benefiting more and the productivity of the land is much better, because now I have direct access to my own land... I feel safer now, because before if I wanted to sell my land, I knew that the tenant would want half. The high rent is proving that there is demand for land.”⁴²

The view expressed here that the high rent proved there was demand for land represents one version of the reality. According to Bach, however, the demand for land among tenants and their ‘willingness’ to pay high rents did not emanate from the profitability of farming, but from the ‘absence of other income sources, a desire for food security,

³⁹ Interview no. 15. It is interesting to note here that the interviewee admitted he would have done the same, if he had been able to access more land under the old law. The fact that he had not been in the position to do so seemed to be the main source of his resentment.

⁴⁰ Interview no. 47. In Bach’s case study, similar arguments were made by owners: “They [the tenant families] have had the land for all these years, they have eaten from it and they have educated their children from it. Now it is enough.” (Bach 2002, p. 179)

⁴¹ Interviews no. 10, 36, 15

⁴² Interview no. 20

and from cultural/emotional ties to the land'.⁴³ Yet the farmers in El Bîr who took their land back continued to insist that many tenants had become 'too comfortable' with the low rents, whereas now they had to work hard for their income. This is illustrated clearly in the following excerpt:

“The untying of the Law forced people to be more productive with the little land they had left. If you are renting in less land, you have to make sure that you get the most out of it – not one inch of land goes unused – even the bits right on the edge of the canal are used to grow garlic. Maybe it is better that people left the land, if they couldn't make a good living out of it anyway... In the first couple of years, after they took away the Law, it was hard for us, because we were getting low prices for the same crops we cultivated before, but the rents were much higher. Now, it is okay, because the prices have been much better in the last two years.”⁴⁴

In the above, the interviewee is implying that hard work can bear fruit despite the increase in rents. Other farmers expressed similar views as follows: “These days, one has to be more committed to farming. If you don't pay the rent, you know you will be kicked out of the land, and you have to go off with your shovel over your shoulder, looking for something else”; “If someone doesn't have a job or any land to fall back on, I consider him to be a parasite living off other people... In the countryside, the work never ends”.⁴⁵ And in the words of another man, “If you put twelve hours into your land every day, it would be one hundred percent... Here, every one is just getting used to being lazy. The crop prices are really good now. A friend of mine is renting only half a feddan and he is making really good money growing vegetables.”⁴⁶ The brother of this interviewee pointed out, however, that the man cultivating vegetables also received a government pension of LE 1,000 the month, i.e. he had a solid basis to start with. Likewise, the interviewee in the above excerpt had a steady second income in the form of government employment, as well as owning 5 qirats of land and several heads of livestock; so she and her husband were definitely in a better position than poorer households, relying solely on the revenue from farming and wage labour.

Contradictory definitions were also given for new developments in the land market in El Bîr, depending on whether the speaker had been able to benefit from the changing status

⁴³ Bach 2002, p. 163

⁴⁴ Interview no. 46

⁴⁵ Interviews no. 7, 23

⁴⁶ Interview no. 34

quo or not. As the market was dubbed a ‘black market’ by those who had less access to land, so the market was viewed as a ‘free or open market’ by those who were benefiting from higher rents, or from the fact that they could now buy or sell as much land as they wanted. “Now, it is an open market and people are buying up the lands if they have the money”; “The rents are in harmony with the market”; “These days, the rent on the market is equal for everyone”.⁴⁷ In other words, if one had the resources, land was available, but at a price.

Those people with the necessary capital, however, did not automatically want to invest it in farming, as indicated by the following comments: “The revenue from agriculture is not high, so big owners invested in businesses or factories”; “The people who sold their land did it to invest their money in some venture.”⁴⁸ But the notion that absentee owners ‘did not know how to farm’ or were not interested in farming, was seen in a positive light by those who could afford the new rents or had the means to accumulate land: “There is availability of land, as the owners who took the land back had never farmed before, so they rented it out. If owners get bored of farming, they can always rent out the land, sell it or get someone to supervise it, so the land will never be uncultivated”.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the view that owners were now free to do what they wanted with their own land, meant that the income was all theirs as they no longer had any legal obligation to keep tenants on indefinitely. This is clear from the following excerpt:

“It is a matter of supply and demand... Before, you could only buy and sell thirty percent of the land in El Bîr, as the rest was all bound up with the Law. Untying the Law was right for the owners. Before, even if one qirat was worth LE 3,000 the owner would only get LE 1,500 if he sold it, but now even if the qirat is worth LE 2,000 he gets all of it. The value of land has been depreciated a lot, but the owner is getting more out of it than before.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Interviews no. 15, 16

⁴⁸ Interviews no. 9, 18

⁴⁹ Interview no. 20. Other interviewees stated, “Those who want to buy land can buy it, for example, the Coptic owners sold half of their land to the Muslims who have money [*ili ma’ irsh*]”; “All the lands in El Bîr are being cultivated and there is still more demand. I am not worried about people leaving the land. It is a limited resource in any case”. (Interviews no. 13, 9)

⁵⁰ Interview no. 40

Another interviewee pointed out: “There is a lot of demand for land and there are still full-time farmers. The owners make use of this and put up the rents... The owner has positioned himself well. He knows where his source of income is coming from.”⁵¹

Hence there were always two sides to the argument: on the one hand, both tenants and small owners had lost out, because land rents had gone up so much. On the other hand, many small owners believed that the new law was fair, because now they could do what they wanted with their land. Yet the plight of particularly vulnerable categories of tenant farmers was not denied by those whose situation had changed for the better. At the same time, the ambivalent light in which most villagers viewed the recent events indicated that there was no united cause for ‘tenants’ against ‘owners’. This factor seems to have been largely ignored by policymakers, whether they supported the regime or not, as they continued to highlight the dangers of ‘social revolution’ in the Egyptian countryside. But this is not to say that poorer members of the village community had no reason to resent the emerging class of wealthy fellahin in El Bîr, even if they happened to be relatives.

6.3 The Big Shots: Friend or Foe?

Indeed many people pointed out that the new status quo had benefited in particular the rich landlords, whether they currently lived in El Bîr or outside the village. And when they described how such owners were taking advantage of the situation, the interviewees’ perceptions differed greatly from those proffered above for the case of ‘tit for tat’. The latter could be applied to small resident owners who had been in an unfair position before, but this conciliatory approach did not extend to richer owners, particularly the children of absentee landlords. For example, during a debate between two brothers about tensions that had arisen over the new law, when the one brother stated that it had made a big difference to the owner to be given back his land, he was challenged by the other as follows: “Yes, but did he buy this land? No, the land was not even inherited. Anyone in power in the days of the British could just take the land and give it to the Christians. Parcels of land were awarded to big names... They got it for

⁵¹ Interview no. 3

free.”⁵² In fact, many inhabitants of El Bîr expressed profound disapproval of land speculation as a means of earning an income. They distinguished between the intrinsic right of a person to benefit from the fruits of his labour and the more debatable right of an absentee owner to profit from an increase in the land rent, without any effort on his part. This is illustrated clearly in the following:

“If I have something I am not benefiting from, why take it? Someone else could benefit from the land and it would be beneficial to the people around him, so why don't I give it to him? At the beginning, the *hiyazât* [landholdings] were with the fellahin. It was going well, people were comfortable and they were paying the rent. Then the government said they would increase the rent. They [the big owners] complained, so the government said: ‘Okay, we will raise it’ and the fellahin said, ‘*mâshi* [alright], raise the rent, take your rights and be satisfied and I will take care of the land, this is my job, I am a farmer, I will give more to it than you’... Now if I am a government employee and I have land, first of all, I don't know about the land and, even if I do know about it, I don't have time for it. There is a proverb that says ‘The owner of two mind-sets is a liar and the owner of three is a hypocrite’... If I have a profession and I do it well, it will give me a lot more than if I try to do ten of them.”⁵³

It is implied here that although the interviewee recognised the right of an owner to take back his land from the tenant as stipulated by the law (“alright, raise the rent, take your rights”), he did not necessarily feel that justice had been done. In his opinion, if the owner did not need the land, as he already had another means of income and knew nothing about farming anyway, he should not have taken it from the fellah, whose livelihood depended upon it. The following excerpt provides a good example of how absentee owners were currently benefiting from Law 96:

“In our cousin's family, there is only one man (who should be the main breadwinner) and four women, and they all live in Heliopolis: as you know, an expensive area of Cairo... Now they get an income of LE 60,000 the year from the rents, whereas before, it was only LE 15,000. With four women, they need this income, because the women will not work... The owners were oppressed. It was unfair for them, because they had to give the tenant half of the money if they sold the land. Tenants were doing well. They were even buying land from the owners. The owners would have to borrow money from the tenants, and this was not their land in the first place.”⁵⁴

⁵² Interview no. 34

⁵³ Interview no. 27

⁵⁴ Interview no. 31

The scenario outlined above is a familiar one. The notion that the owners were ‘oppressed’, the criticism that tenants were making money from land that had never belonged to them, and the idea that the increased rent was the owner’s rightful due (after all, there was only one legitimate breadwinner in the family, a male, and they lived in an expensive suburb of Cairo): all this considered justification enough for the fact that they ‘needed this income’. Although many supporters of the new law referred to the notion that tenants had been able to buy the land they previously rented from landlords, the validity of such claims is questionable. Abdel-Aal showed in his detailed study of agrarian reform and tenancy in Upper Egypt that “the majority of owner-operators with rent-in were initially landowners, while a smaller proportion were initially tenants and became able to own land.”⁵⁵ Scott described in his case study a similar tendency for villagers to ‘bend the facts’ or ‘stretch the truth’ to suit their version of a story. For example, the way in which the rich landlords perceived their wealth differed greatly from the way in which other people would see it. They would always point out that they were not ‘rich’. It was more a matter of being ‘comfortable’, whereas they often accused the poor villagers of dissimulating or exaggerating their desperate situation. To quote Scott: “As with questions of income, the landlord exaggerates the quality of the land and the tenants’ profits, while the cultivator loses no opportunity to denigrate the field and understate his harvest and profits.”⁵⁶

At the same time, however, the interviewee in the excerpt above emphasised that her father, who had been appointed to supervise their cousin’s land, had refused on several occasions to evict the tenants who had been there the last twenty years, even though other farmers had offered to pay higher rent. Indeed, the opinions of the farmers were inevitably influenced by the behaviour of particular individuals, as well as the kind of relationship they had with them. The following statements illustrate how relations could differ from one individual to the next: “If people had good relations with their owners, they rented the same land again”; “Some owners were kinder than others. Some asked

⁵⁵ Abdel-Aal 2002, p. 150

⁵⁶ Scott 1985, pp. 198–209

for LE 65 or 70 per qirat and other owners, who were not so kind, asked for LE 80 per qirat and they told the tenants: ‘either the rent is this, or you don’t get the land’.⁵⁷

Landlords were not always characterised as the ‘bad guys’; tenant farmers who were satisfied with them made comments, such as: “The owners here were fair, they come from a good Christian family, they trust me with the land”; “It was very calm here... we have good people [i.e. good owners].”⁵⁸ Another (Muslim) interviewee expressed his view as follows: “The big landowners in El Bîr are Christians and they were kind... In other areas there were Muslim owners. I heard there were problems in these places.”⁵⁹ One tenant farmer also pointed out that certain individuals in El Bîr had made life difficult for their landlords by speaking to them rudely or by not paying the rent on time. He emphasised that “It was very individual. There were respectful people and there were others who were not so respectful... It was a matter of settlement between people. If they were able to settle it among themselves, the law did not have to affect them.”⁶⁰ The following example gives a good idea of what the farmers meant, when they talked about “sorting things out” or “settling it among themselves”:

“If the tenants had grown old and their children were being educated, the landlords may have decided to give them pieces of land to rent that were further away... Whoever felt comfortable with their tenants, kept them on, while those who didn’t have a good relationship with a tenant would ‘bore him with little things’. For example, they would give him land to rent that was not so good, so he would be ‘made to decide to leave the land’...”⁶¹

The strategy of ‘boring the tenant with little things’ until he eventually became fed up and abandoned a piece of land would certainly have created ill feelings between people, whether they were related or not. For instance, one farmer in El Bîr who had formerly rented land from a rich relative called him a ‘son of a dog’, and stated that he would never speak to him again or have anything to do with him.⁶² However, such sentiments would, more often than not, be expressed indirectly. That is, farmers who had rented land from relatives or from known and respected families before October 1997 and

⁵⁷ Interviews no. 1, 28

⁵⁸ Interviews no. 36, 15. The term ‘good’ in this instance meant that people were well behaved and that they were fairly well off in the financial sense.

⁵⁹ Interview no. 28

⁶⁰ Interview no. 14

⁶¹ Interview no. 17

⁶² Interview no. 50

continued to do so would be unlikely to complain in an outspoken manner about the behaviour of their landlords, as they didn't want to risk being evicted. For example, Scott quoted a tenant farmer in Sedaka as saying once: "Poor people can't [complain]; when I'm sick or need work, I may have to ask him [the landlord] again... I am angry in my heart."⁶³ Likewise, resource-poor farmers in El Bîr were dependent on the good will of their landlords to continue renting land out to them or to charge reasonable rents, so they would not necessarily articulate their true feelings about the nature of their dealings. Saad noted in a similar study conducted in Upper Egypt that 'feelings of anger and resentment towards owners would be characterised by generalisations expressed by tenants on a more abstract level, but not specifically to landlords they knew personally'.⁶⁴

6.4 The Vocabulary of Dissent

In this way, if the villagers disliked a particular landlord and the way he or she behaved, they could describe in great detail the kind of person they believed him or her to be, but without confronting the landlord in question face-to-face. Influential men competing for prestigious positions in the local administration needed the support of the villagers as much as the latter needed the former to protect them from state interference in local affairs. Hence damaging a person's reputation could be a key weapon of dissent. As one young man pointed out, "Family reputation is a very subtle problem, but it is important. People know whether you supported them or not, when they stood for a certain post... If someone registers himself on the local elections list, the government sends out

⁶³ Scott 1985, p. 279

⁶⁴ Saad 2001, p. 16:

inspectors to check out their credentials. They talk to people from the village and find out whether their claims are valid or not.”⁶⁵

Therefore, if a landlord gained the reputation of being stingy, greedy, tight-fisted or arrogant, it could seriously jeopardise his or her status in the community.⁶⁶ For example, one of the Coptic landlords from El Bîr who was a lawyer and lived in Cairo had acquired the reputation of being extremely miserly. According to an older farmer who had rented land from this man for several years, when he came to collect his rent, he would walk around the village in a pair of dirty old pyjamas, even though he was a wealthy man. This interviewee commented, “People in the fields are cleaner than he is... It is said that he has capital worth LE 70 million. He does not need this land, but he calculates even for five piasters. He deals with money, as though he were dying of hunger...” Another observation made about this landlord was that he would strut up and down the streets with a white crocheted cap on like the old Greeks in Alexandria and that he was known to be a man who “made a big fuss”, “a lot of noise” [*“il ragil da, ragil dawshagi!”*]⁶⁷ The way in which the villagers described him was clearly intended to amuse, but this did not affect the essence of what they were saying. The tendency to minimise tensions with particular individuals by employing humour, meant that the fellahin could express exactly what they thought amongst themselves, without

⁶⁵ Parliamentary elections are taken very seriously in rural Egypt and voting levels are high, in comparison to the cities. This is an indication of “the persistence of the political role of big families and wealthy men who mobilize their relatives, supporters and dependents in political struggles with similar rivals” (ibid, p. 9, see also Abu-Lughod 1972). At the same time, however, it is rare that political conflict and elections at the local level pose a serious threat to the existing power structure. One reason for this may be what Springborg called “the continuity of notable families in village settings and their close connections with bureaucrats and the political elites on higher levels.” (Springborg 1990a, p.466) Cuno analyses the historical relationship between the rural notables and Mohammed Ali in the nineteenth century. He pointed out that “Many middle- and upper-class Egyptians in the late twentieth century have ancestors who were village sheikhs or ‘*umdas*’” (Cuno 1992, p. 166).

⁶⁶ Scott pointed out that “By rewarding, if only symbolically, those whose conduct is more nearly in accord with their values and by slandering those whose conduct most blatantly transgresses their values, the village poor undercut the moral authority of their enemies by allocating virtually the only resources over which they have some control: reputation and prestige... For it is shame, that concern for the good opinion of one’s neighbours and friends, which circumscribes behaviour within the moral boundaries created by shared values.” (Scott 1985, p. 235)

⁶⁷ Interviews no. 28, 30

jeopardising their contractual relationship with that person. As a poor farm labourer once said: “Unless you turn it into a joke, you would die.”⁶⁸

Hence feelings of anger or betrayal related to the implementation of Law 96 were expressed through more subtle means of dissent in El Bîr. This confirms Scott’s observation that “In public life – that is to say, in power-laden settings – a carefully calculated conformity prevails for the most part.” On the other hand, ‘backbiting, gossip, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures and silences of contempt’ would be confined to the ‘backstage of village life’.⁶⁹ This does not mean, however, that the backstage of village life had no influence over the public arena. For example, the conduct of the former ‘*omda*’s son was disliked so much by the villagers, that his nomination for the current position of ‘*omda* had failed dismally, although he came from one of the most influential landowning families in El Bîr. One young man expressed his view in the following manner: “As for the son of the ex-‘*omda*, he is the lowest of the low. If you go ask him for a signature, he will say, ‘Okay, but buy me a packet of cigarettes and after I sign, I would like a bottle of pineapple juice’... He is fifty-two years old. Doesn’t he have more respect for himself than that? No-one in the village takes him seriously; the only ones who go to him to solve their problems are the kids”.⁷⁰

Thus local power dynamics in El Bîr influenced the way in which tensions arising from Law 96’s implementation were dealt with. Similarly, Mitchell found in his case study that the balance of power did not always favour wealthy landowners, in particular if they were not actively engaged in the day-to-day affairs of the village. For example, in one dispute, a tenant farmer was able to prevent the owners from reclaiming their land as the latter lived in a neighbouring hamlet and were second-generation heirs of the original owner and therefore did not know where the dispersed fragments were located. As they were not powerful enough to find the political support they needed to take back the land, it remained enclosed within the larger holdings of the tenant farmer and his brothers. In another case, a young widow was able to reclaim her holding of less than an

⁶⁸ Interview no. 8

⁶⁹ Scott 1985, p. xvii

⁷⁰ Interview no. 29

acre from her wealthy tenant/relative. The tenant, whose farm was more than fifty acres in size, initially refused to give back the land, but was persuaded by other relatives and the village heads to do so, as it was argued that the woman had no other means of support. Mitchell concludes as follows: “In this case the ending of a tenancy contract created the opposite effect to that intended by the proponents of free-market reforms, removing land from a large commercial farm and returning it to a household-based woman farmer. Once again the logic of the free market produced different outcomes when displaced by other logics at work in the village.”⁷¹

The description below given by Amm Ali provides another good example of how disapproval of the behaviour of certain landlords, as well as anger against the government over the new law, was conveyed on the backstage of village life in El Bîr:

“Gamal Abdel Nasser freed us, may God bless his soul... Ah, but now we fellahin are blowing in the wind. We should write to Hosni [Mubarak] and let him know what our environment is like. In this environment, it is as if we were alive, but inside, we are really dead... Dear Hosni, we have to tell you that this is indeed the BLACK YEAR [*di sana soda*]...”

Ah yes, we know that some of us tenants were ‘very bad’ and that we wanted to get half of the land from our owners, but now we have to deal with their children... We are talking here about ‘Daddy’s land’. These kids come to us and read out from their little notebooks: ‘Daddy inherited 10 feddans and Mummy inherited 10 feddans’, but they do not know where their land is, they do not know where the boundaries are, they do not even know where the water is coming from.

If only the owner would come and say: ‘No, no, keep the money, keep the money. I would rather divorce my wife than accept the rent’. But instead, at every sunrise, the owner wants his money. Oh God, the poor fellah! Now, the owner is playing with the *bundera* [pendulum].⁷² We have to let them know [i.e. the government] about our limited income environment... What happened? Did the land suddenly sprout plums or something? Why did it become so expensive overnight? ...”⁷³

In the second paragraph, it is clear that Amm Ali is mocking the new owners by calling them ‘kids’ and implying that they had no idea how to farm or where their land was. He regaled his audience by imitating their posh city accents and how they would hitch up

⁷¹ Mitchell 2002, pp. 265, 266

⁷² In Arabic *bundera* may be a pendulum, but it could also mean anything that measures units, such as a taximeter. The interviewee made the movement of the pendulum swinging to and fro to emphasise his point here.

⁷³ Interview no. 21

their freshly ironed *gallabiyas*, as they minced their way through fields of dirt and manure. In fact, many interviewees criticised the new status quo in El Bîr, because the children of the original landlords were not interested in farming and did not know how to farm anyway. In their view, this had led to a marked decrease in the productivity of the land, as the following comments illustrate: “The old law encouraged a lot of people to farm, to look for lands to buy”; “The productivity of the land has been affected negatively. The landlord is not a fellah”; “Instead of five fellahin farming two feddans of land, now you have one guy who doesn’t know how to farm on ten feddans... They [the owners] get in a supervisor and the yields go down, as they don’t oversee what happens on the land”.⁷⁴

Apart from mocking the new landlords in humorous terms, there is also a deliberate use of funereal imagery in the above excerpt: “This is the Black Year”; “Inside, we are really dead”; “We fellahin are blowing in the wind”. Although Amm Ali greatly amused his listeners, because of the manner in which he delivered his speech, the reality he portrayed was a stark one. It is also important to note that Amm Ali addressed his grievances directly to the President (“Dear Hosni...”), as indignation with the government was often expressed far more volubly than anger against individual landlords. Saad noted that similar funereal idioms were used by tenant farmers to describe the day that land changed hands in October 1997. Putting up black banners and walking around in processions with empty coffins were also common forms of protest in the months preceding the law’s implementation.⁷⁵ In a subsequent interview with the same group of tenant farmers in El Bîr, the metaphor of the colour black was referred to once again:

Farmer 1: “The rent has increased. It will be LE70/qirat for the new clover season... Amm Ali is going to see it very black. He doesn’t know yet about the raise.”

⁷⁴ Interviews no. 15, 3, 10. In the words of another farmer, “Productivity has decreased, because now you have a supervisor on 10 feddans using wage labour, instead of ten fellahin farming 1 feddan each” (Interview no. 13). The implication here is that absenteeism leads to the deterioration of crop yields, because landlords are more interested in the income they receive from rents rather than from the land itself.

⁷⁵ Saad 2001, pp. 8, 9; see also Bush 2002, p. 200

Farmer 2: “Livestock traders come and rent 4 or 5 feddans in the clover season. They push the prices up and tenants have to leave the land.”

Farmer 1: “This raise will affect the annual rent, but we still don’t know the new prices. Before, the Law regulated the rent. They [the government] would say the annual rent is this much; the annual rent is that much. But now it is a black market; ‘black’ in the way Amm Ali meant it.”⁷⁶

As suggested above, the fact that rents were no longer state controlled was viewed by many farmers as somehow illegal and this had led to the creation of a ‘black’ market. In the words of another farmer, “The big guys are renting land out on the black market... Before, we paid the rent comfortably with no pressure, but now we are under pressure and the owner just wants his money right on time... The untying of the Law created a black market, by leaving everything so vague”.⁷⁷

The idea that life had become unpredictable for many fellahin was compounded by the feeling that the situation was no longer in their hands. Now it was the ‘big guys’ who were in control more than ever before, and they were ‘playing with the pendulum’. As another interviewee put it, “These days, even before the harvesting time is over, the owner comes to me and asks: ‘Are you going to pay the rent... otherwise, you can go to hell!’”⁷⁸ The notion of ‘illegality’ or a lack of regulation could refer more specifically to the removal of rent controls, but it could also include other economic liberalisation measures, such as the deregulation of farm input and output prices, as well as the abolition of subsidies. Thus criticism about Law 96 was often broadened to strong expressions of disapproval concerning many recent government policies regarding privatisation. This is indicated in the following excerpt:

“The law was not studied properly when it was introduced in 1997. The fellah was helping the government, but now they took away all the subsidies... the traders and the banks are eating up the fellah... What has to be done is that people’s relations to one another should be regulated: farmers’ relations with one another, with the government, with private traders, prices should be regulated. The only reason why there is hatred between the rich and the poor is because there is injustice.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Interview no. 26

⁷⁷ Interview no. 18

⁷⁸ Interview no. 21

⁷⁹ Interview no. 6

Thus, the idea of a black future for the fellahin was linked to notions of instability and illegality, as well as a strong sense of injustice experienced by those whose situation had deteriorated, as underlined by the following statements: “Before there was a certain degree of stability, but now there is no stability”; “These days, there is no security, we know that we may have to leave the land one day or another”; “It is an uncomfortable situation... Every year they want to put the rent up. In that law, there was no justice”.⁸⁰

6.5 ‘We Are the Sons of Pharaohs’

Saad believes that the loss of security for tenant farmers meant far more than economic hardship. In her view, ‘It hit at the basis of a moral and political order’, which had been regarded by the fellahin in the decades following Nasser’s reforms as stable and unchangeable.⁸¹ The idea that Law 178 continued to be viewed by many fellahin as “the Law of Freedom”, which constituted a binding social contract with the state, was reflected in many comments made by interviewees in El Bîr: “A law like this should never have been untied. It was a Republican law made by Gamal Abdel Nasser”; “Nasser changed our society from a half percent society to a one hundred percent society. He gave freedom and ownership to the people [*el sha‘b*]”.⁸²

Indeed, the interviewees had many stories to tell about the ‘dark times of feudalism’ prior to Nasser’s rule, when, in their view, the fellahin were living in a dire state of ignorance and oppression: “I hate the word feudalism. I heard from my father that the fellahin in those days were very poor and simple. You would get the owner of a big estate and the fellahin would be working for him so hard. But at the end of the day, they would still be beaten. The estate owner would treat these people as if they were worthless. They wouldn’t get their wages or their rights or anything. It was a system of slavery, without conscience or feeling. I imagine that God will set these landlords on

⁸⁰ Interviews no. 9, 17, 34

⁸¹ Saad 2002, p. 2

⁸² Interviews no. 34, 6. Other interviewees commented as follows: “the Revolution was one hundred percent for the people”; “Nasser was the one who liberated the country and got rid of the feudalists” (Interviews no. 4, 13).

fire. Feudalism is what caused real oppression.”⁸³ Ghosh underlined in his study that subsequent to Nasser’s reforms the liberty to work as one pleased was viewed by the fellahin as far more than an abstract notion of freedom. It concerned the right to sell one’s labour or not, as opposed to the most hateful aspect of their ‘feudalist’ past: being made to work against their will. As one inhabitant of El Bîr expressed it, “When I am free, I do everything well. If I am a slave, I do things because I am forced to do them. I don’t do them with my full heart and things do not turn out well. Freedom, really, is my entire life.”⁸⁴

As the era of ‘feudalism’ and oppression was juxtaposed to the ‘blessed’ years following Nasser’s Revolution, so the latter was viewed by many as being in stark contrast to more recent times: “This government has brought back capitalism and feudalism. Everything Nasser built, this government has destroyed”; “He [Mubarak] is treating Egypt like one big estate”.⁸⁵ Younger interviewees, in particular, felt that it was not enough to be free in their choice of work, and they questioned the extent to which poorer people in the village could truly decide what work they did: “You have freedom if you are an owner; as a tenant, you are just trying to save money to keep going, to survive. Being a fellah no longer works for the young. Your father makes you hate farming, because he only talks about the expenses”; “Nowadays, if you have no money in the village, you are nothing. When the rich man dies, the poor man takes his clothes and puts them on. When the poor man dies, nobody cares and they say: ‘It is better for him that he is dead’.”⁸⁶ In fact, the ‘bloodsucking’ private sector was the new oppressor in the eyes of many inhabitants: “The private sector is killing its workers. They work for twelve hours non-stop and if a young man is careless, he can simply be replaced”; “Working in a factory sucks your blood, whereas if you invested twelve hours into your

⁸³ Interview no. 23. Another interviewee stated, “Nasser’s Reform was good at the time, otherwise all Egyptians would be very poor now. The period of the feudalists was terrible. Thank God, it is all over now”. (Interview no. 40) Saad pointed out that the term ‘feudalism’, often dismissed as Nasserist rhetoric, is understood by the fellahin in an ‘operational’ sense. A ‘feudalist’ would refer to any owner who employed people on his land and could kick them out as he pleased. (Saad 1998, p. 390)

⁸⁴ Ghosh 1987, p. 120. Another interviewee commented, “Thank God, there is no oppression now. People have enough freedom. They can choose what job they want to do. If they want to work here, they can, if they want to work there, they can, they are free to do so. No-one tells you: ‘wake up at this time, do this, do that, go here, go there!’” (Interviews no. 23, 27)

⁸⁵ Interviews no. 18, 22

⁸⁶ Interviews no. 34, 41

land every day, it would be one hundred percent”; “The Revolution took businesses away from people, but now there is privatisation and it is sucking the blood of the people”.⁸⁷

According to one young man, the current state of affairs in the Egyptian countryside was by no means accidental: ‘We are the sons of Pharaohs. We work well, if we are beaten well and he [Mubarak] is aware of this. He is the Big Pharaoh. We are just given enough to survive, because if we got too comfortable, we would start thinking and he doesn’t want that.’⁸⁸ The fact that it was no longer worthwhile for tenant farmers to make long-term investment in the land exacerbated their deep sense of betrayal by the state: “There is always give-and-take in these things. The fellahin were productive before, but now they feel no loyalty to the land. Why should I do something for land that does not belong to me?” Other farmers expressed their views as follows: “Before, with the old Law, people worked with passion on the land”; “If the government had any intelligence, it wouldn’t have changed everything... They should have allowed each owner to negotiate the rent with the tenant and let him stay on the land.”⁸⁹ Hence, the idea that the owners ‘had not been allowed’ to negotiate with their tenants was attributed to the way in which the government had implemented Law 96 and not to the behaviour of the landlords themselves.

At the same time, other interviewees viewed the new status quo not so much as a fundamental reversal of a moral and political order, but more as the inevitable end of an era⁹⁰. This is indicated by the following conversation that took place one evening with a tenant farmer, who had become a good friend:

Shukri: “So, have you heard anything new? Are they going to reverse the law and give back the landholdings to the tenants?”

Researcher: “No, we haven’t heard anything new... I think it will be difficult for such a thing to happen now.”

⁸⁷ Interviews no. 11, 34, 47

⁸⁸ Interview no. 22

⁸⁹ Interviews no. 5, 21, 14. The interviewee went on to say, “In that transition, the government lost a lot, because if the owner told a tenant you have to leave the land after the rice harvest, then the tenant would not take care of the rice properly”.

⁹⁰ It is interesting to note here that the LCHR referred to the endorsement of Law 96 on July 17, 1992 as being a day which “marked the beginning of the end of an era in Egypt’s agricultural history” (Ismail 1998, p. 41).

Shukri: “Yes, it was the end of an era... it is over now. Before, we were only forty million and now the population of Egypt has doubled... how can they [i.e. the government] make promises they will not keep to that many people?”⁹¹

The notion of the past as being full of goodness and God-given wealth, of life as being blessed for the fellahin, as opposed to more recent times, reflected nostalgia for days gone by versus a general sense of unease about changing times.⁹² In other words, the upheavals that had been brought about by Law 96 were viewed as part of a wider historical process and, as an older interviewee once commented, “History makes you sad”.⁹³ A tenant farmer presented his view in the following way: “Now it is more a question of survival. The fellahin have lost the privilege of the *hiyaza* [landholding]...⁹⁴ The fact that he defined the right to a landholding as a ‘privilege’ which the fellahin had lost, indicates that in his view, it was never a given. One young woman observed that “Nowadays, the tenants have to pay the fixed rent even before the crop is harvested, so of course they are not able to put money aside for other things. In the old days, life was ‘blessed’ [there was *baraka*] for the fellahin.”⁹⁵ Similarly, an old tenant farmer worded his sense of loss as follows: “The rent is the biggest expense for me these days and I feel the difference... Before, God gave us *kheir* [well-being/wealth]; we had extra money for little things, but now the crop just covers itself”.⁹⁶

Yet what angered the villagers most were the ongoing corruption scandals underlying the state’s drive towards economic reform, including the way in which Law 96 had been introduced: “We are not a strong enough economy to leave it to the market. The Egyptian economy is like a sponge, it has no proper consistency. The rich keep getting richer. They are the ministers and the big bosses, this *shilla* [network of ‘friends’] is running the country”... “The way privatisation is being implemented here, it is only serving the interests of the ‘dogs’ [the ministers]. They are all partners in crime. We

⁹¹ Interview no. 14

⁹² Saad analysed in detail the juxtaposition made by the fellahin between the ‘blessed’ times of the past versus their ambivalent feelings about the present: « Lorsque le mot *baraka* est employé, l’accent est mis sur la relation avec le passé, rendu ainsi meilleur et plus familier... Le passé dont il est question ici ne renvoie pas à une période particulière, mais à une époque antérieure indéfinie où la vie semblait maîtrisable. » (Saad 1996, pp. 270)

⁹³ Interview no. 40

⁹⁴ Interview no. 7

⁹⁵ Interview no. 37

⁹⁶ Interview no. 21

have the richest resources in the Middle East, but the thieves are too many”.⁹⁷ It is clear here that El Bîr’s inhabitants had no doubts about whom to blame for the unhappy state of affairs: “These days, there are people who make it big and people who are not eating at all”; “The guy at the top is his own thief. This country needs complete change”; “The ministers are all aware of the corruption and he [Mubarak] is at the head of the ‘gang’ [*asâba*]. If anyone says anything, he is taken away and nobody knows what has happened to him, and if he reappears he is accused of being a terrorist”.⁹⁸

In this way, the notion of ‘the big guys against the small guys’ became a common framework of reference for people who expressed opposition to the current situation: “The big farmers are doing fine, getting the loans, the inputs they need, but the state doesn’t care about the small guys; they are distracted, just trying to keep going, to survive”; “When the farmers with palm trees have a problem with their dates, lots of people [i.e. cooperative employees] come on motorcycles to help them, but when we had a problem with our maize, they didn’t do anything.”⁹⁹ And according to another interviewee: “The reason why this law is not nice is because it only benefits the ‘high, high guys’... They didn’t come back to the land; they are not connected to it at all. If they own a big piece of land, they ask someone from the village to oversee it”.¹⁰⁰

Thus the ‘high, high guys’, the ‘big bosses’, and the rich farmers with date palms were the lucky ones, while the ‘small guys’ were ‘distracted, trying to survive’, or simply ‘going along’, as another farmer put it.¹⁰¹ According to one young man, “Only engineers and doctors live comfortably here. As for the sergeants, they all own estates... We are just ‘buying our heads’.”¹⁰² The expression ‘to buy one’s head’ means to get on with things. In other words, the ‘small guys’ had no choice other than to continue about their daily business if they knew what was good for them. Another interviewee expressed his resentment of the ‘big shots’ as follows: “The new law put the landlords in a very good position... It’s okay for the rich, but what about the tenants or those who

⁹⁷ Interviews no. 5, 6

⁹⁸ Interviews no. 12, 16, 22

⁹⁹ Interviews no. 6, 8

¹⁰⁰ Interview no. 4

¹⁰¹ Interview no. 13

¹⁰² Interview no. 7

only own one feddan? The big engineers are the ones who got reclaimed desert lands. The feudalists will return there... They [the government] didn't give us any land or jobs."¹⁰³ The 'big guys', undoubtedly the winners in this scenario, were the engineers, doctors, sergeants, rich farmers with date palms, absentee owners, government officials, state employees, traders, or anyone with the right connections. And in the view of the fellahin, the wealthy were certainly taking advantage of their reinforced status, as indicated by the following excerpt:

“The fellahin had money before to invest in the land, but these days they are just surviving. They can't save and in a situation when one family member gets ill or wants to marry, people become desperate. The big traders¹⁰⁴ benefit from higher crop prices, because they can stock up. They give loans to the fellah and take his crop in return, so farmers are pressurised if their crop gets a disease. They may sign a blank cheque and become even more indebted.”¹⁰⁵

By contrast, the 'small guys' who were losing out were the landless wage labourers, tenant farmers, small owners or just 'fellahin': “Whoever was buying two sacks of fodder is now buying half a sack; farmers who had six buffaloes have sold five and kept only one. People are rationing with everything”; “The tenant cannot cover himself until the crop is actually harvested, so even if he gets a loan to cover production costs, once he sells the crop, he just breaks even”.¹⁰⁶ The ongoing impoverishment of resource-poor farmers was referred to on many occasions. As one interviewee expressed it: “Three years ago, poor fellahin in the village started selling off their livestock at the weekly market much more than before, as they can no longer afford the fodder... Instead of eating meat twice the week, the poorer people now eat meat once the week. They engage in wage labour these days or else they work in the Tenth of Ramadan.”¹⁰⁷ The juxtaposition between the then and the now is illustrated clearly in the following excerpt:

“Before they untied the Law, the situation was fair for the fellahin... It was far more balanced. The rich man could eat and the poor man could eat. If a fellah had to sell half of his rice crop to the cooperative, he would get in return, all the necessary inputs, access to

¹⁰³ Interview no. 32

¹⁰⁴ According to another farmer, there were ten big traders in El Bîr and they were like a 'gang' and could fix whatever prices they wanted on the market (Interview no. 20).

¹⁰⁵ Interview no. 5

¹⁰⁶ Interviews no. 10, 11

¹⁰⁷ Interview no. 20

credit... Rice would be sold by the government at a subsidised price, so poorer people could get their rations, while people like us [i.e., the richer fellahin], could sell at the market price and buy in greater quantities on the market.

Now nothing is regulated and I don't know what will happen to these poor people... It is the high ranking officials who got their land back. They are greedy, absolute capitalists. They are just getting richer and richer and they carry on as if the poor people didn't even exist."¹⁰⁸

The speaker makes it obvious here that he is extremely dissatisfied with the current government and particularly the way in which it implemented Law 96. The fact that it was the “high ranking officials who got their land back” and that powerful political interests were involved was a strong criticism made by El Bîr’s inhabitants on more than one occasion. For example, as one interviewee expressed it, “The main reason for the new law was that there had been a lot of complaints from landowners. What really made the law come through was that they had connections, no matter what justification they [the government] give for it”.¹⁰⁹ Other similar comments were as follows: “There were big interests involved in the land, and that is why all these things happened in 1997”; “The law came from the Parliament and they are the ones who own the land”.¹¹⁰ In this way, the farmers tended to express their anger over the new law by focusing attention on the government itself, rather than blaming individual landlords or other local power mediators.

6.6 Conclusion

The avoidance of outright conflict over Law 96 in El Bîr may be attributed, therefore, to a variety of factors. As indicated in Chapter 5, one major element was its perceived ‘non-negotiability’. At the same time, the majority of villagers expressed contradictory views about the changes in land tenure, because of the very nature of the relations in which they had engaged over the years. That is, they had accessed land through a variety of complex and interrelated relationships, so the differentiation between tenants and owners was not clear-cut. This is why they responded to the changes in such an ambivalent manner. As described in the case studies above, many villagers felt that the

¹⁰⁸ Interview no. 33

¹⁰⁹ Interview no. 6

¹¹⁰ Interviews no. 3, 17

new law could be justified in the sense that smallholders had been the ones ‘in an unfair position’ (*mutazalim*) before 1997, although now the leaseholders were the ones who were ‘oppressed’ (*mazlumîn*). Yet a large number of smallholders had rented in land at minimal cost under the old law, so although they benefited from the new status quo in one way, their situation had worsened in other ways.



A wealthy fellah who had benefited from the implementation of Law 96

Moreover, as the tenancy web involved expectations of solidarity; obligations to the community; personal ties and mutual dependency; it was often to the benefit of both parties to maintain as far as possible an appearance of harmony, particularly among those who actually resided in the village. This is why an emphasis would always be placed on minimal conflict and good relations between people. For instance, many full-time tenant farmers continued to rent land from the same owners, who were often relatives, as they had few alternative means of feeding their families. They could hardly

afford, therefore, to jeopardise their relationship with this person by openly articulating feelings of anger or betrayal. That is, there were fewer personal risks at stake if tensions with the latter were downplayed, while feelings of injustice and indignation regarding Law 96 were directed in a more abstract manner towards high-ranking government officials, who were viewed by the villagers to be living in another dimension altogether. This did not mean, however, that tenant farmers submitted to the new status quo without expressing any form of dissent whatsoever. As has been illustrated in the examples outlined above, the backstage of village life provided many opportunities for the fellahin to commit subtle acts of verbal sabotage, and these acts could endanger the reputation of particular individuals, who relied on the villagers for their support in local political affairs.