

### Conclusions: Private Violence and the Fiction of Rural Revolt

Corruption has long been endemic in Egypt, so it comes as little surprise that the introduction of Law 96 entailed an increasingly unequal redistribution of resources. Given that the reform was carried out by a regime accountable to no-one but itself, it is inevitable that the interests of particular individuals or groups would be promoted. Indeed it is remarkable that donor agencies, such as USAID and the FAO, never questioned the institutional mechanisms in place for such policies to be implemented successfully. It has been shown here that the repressive actions taken by local agents of Mubarak's regime ensured that the new tenancy law was executed as quickly and efficiently as possible, while it was made clear to the farmers that as far as the authorities were concerned, there was no room for debate and nor would there ever be.

And yet there were other dynamics at play, which were prompted more by the need to establish certain prerogatives than by concerns of expediency. Resorting to private acts of intimidation or torture may have been an efficient means of silencing dissent on the one hand. But on the other, whenever boundaries were deliberately overstepped by members of the security forces, it entailed an element of risk. In this case, the instantaneous assertion of power was at the epicentre and thereby precluded the need to consider the repercussions of violations committed. Moreover, by its very nature, it was guaranteed that the villagers would not readily admit to the existence of such private violence. The perpetrators were not strangers to the communities involved; they knew it well and so did their victims. The personal connection ensured a complicity of silence, while its peculiarly intimate manifestation was the reason for its singular capacity to pervade rural Egyptian society at so many different levels.<sup>1</sup> In a culture of fear, the silence surrounding certain acts – the 'space of death' as Micheal Taussig called it – is the most effective means to perpetuate the threat of future acts.<sup>2</sup> And ultimately the perpetrators knew they would not be called upon to account for their acts, because of the way in which the stage had already been set.

But the way in which Mubarak's regime showed its 'serious commitment to implementation' by employing force is likely to be counter-productive in the long term. It has only served to jeopardise its already fading credibility even further. For example, the case studies described for Daqahliya governorate indicate that excessive intervention on the part of the police and state

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<sup>1</sup> As Mitchell once observed, "The disappearance or the hidden act of terror gains its force as an absence that is continually made present." (Mitchell 2002, p. 153)

security whenever attempts were made by farmers to resist dispossession, more often than not, led to an escalation of conflict. The ensuing harvest of violence in the Egyptian countryside, as documented by the LCHR, was 147 dead and another 1,505 injured over a three-year period (January 1997 – December 2000), whether through dispossession of tenant farmers by the police, security forces, landowners and thugs, or due to increased land related conflicts among rural household members and their neighbours.

Furthermore, the official reconciliation committees set up to negotiate agreements between owners and tenants were little more than a publicity stunt for the benefit of the broader public. They had little correlation with the traditional reconciliation procedures commonly practised in the Egyptian countryside, as illustrated by the case study of El Bîr, in which a settlement would be at least nominally arbitrated. No attempts were made to reach compromises with the tenant farmers. On the contrary, those fellahin who tried to resist eviction by filing court cases against their owners were the ones who suffered most from repressive measures taken by the police and state security.

In light of this, the common view expressed by farmers in El Bîr that Law 96 was non-negotiable reflects a pragmatic appraisal of the situation at hand. This was also one of the main reasons alluded to by interviewees for the avoidance of outright confrontation with the forces of law and order in the aftermath of October 1997. The reports of violent clashes between the security forces and evicted farmers elsewhere were taken seriously by the villagers, in addition to the cases of police intimidation that had occurred closer to home. Moreover, it was indicated that any tensions which had arisen in El Bîr as a result of the changes in tenancy relations represented a radical departure from the day-to-day disputes in the village. In this sense, it was out of the question that normal procedures for reconciliation could have been employed, whether this meant arranging for a customary assembly to be held or going to court. Zürcher and Koehler's study of the potentials of (dis)order in the Caucasus and the Balkans shows that where formal and informal institutions of social control interlock, there is greater stability.<sup>3</sup> This was also the case in El Bîr, where the close connections that members of the customary arbitration committees maintained with local state institutions meant that few elders would have risked their position by explicitly going against a decree issued by the government, even if strong criticisms about the law were expressed in private.

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<sup>2</sup> See Taussig's paper in Besteman 2002, pp. 211–244.

The idea that Law 96 was non-negotiable was strengthened further by the fact that the leaders of the opposition forces had failed to gain any concessions from the government. Any urban-based support of the farmers' cause had already been severely weakened in the months preceding the law's implementation, as coercive measures taken by the state resulted in a situation in which opposition party members and other activists feared for their own safety. It had also been made clear to the farmers that anyone who openly resisted the law's implementation would provoke a draconian response from the regime's security forces. Thus avoidance of confrontation was the most sensible route to follow and contentious issues related to the new law were buried as quickly as possible.

At the same time, it has been argued here that the absence of overt conflict in El Bîr was related to local power dynamics that were at play when the new tenancy bill was introduced. First, maintaining good connections with influential members of the community was a key aspect of village politics. In the public sphere, therefore, a deliberate conformity prevailed. Since many tenant farmers who could afford to had continued renting land from the same owners, it was logical that they kept any feelings of resentment towards the latter to themselves. Instead, their indignation was directed towards the government and in particular prominent officials who were known to have abused their positions of power in order to benefit from the new status quo.

Nevertheless, the backstage of village life provided ample opportunity for the inhabitants of El Bîr to carry out subtle acts of verbal sabotage, and those competing for positions of local power and prestige were fully aware of this. A rich vocabulary of dissent existed in El Bîr for landlords and their agents or other figures of authority whose behaviour was strongly disapproved of. As the latter relied on the villagers for their political support, they would not easily risk endangering their reputation by behaving in a manner that contradicted established norms. In this sense, if the relationship between a landlord and his or her tenants had generally been one of shared respect, there was more likelihood of a compromise on the rent increase between the two parties being reached. Or at least that the semblance of an agreement was subscribed to, as it was in the interests of both parties to keep up appearances in the eyes of the community.

By contrast, those owners who came back to El Bîr to 'take their rights' in a rude or arrogant manner were the ones subjected to the most vehement character assassination on the part of their tenants. Correspondingly, the fellahin were more likely to criticise the speculative manner in

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<sup>3</sup> See Koehler and Zürcher 2003, *Potentials of (Dis)order*

which wealthy absentee owners had profited from the changes in tenancy relations. These landlords employed supervisors to oversee their land and only came to the village occasionally to collect the rent, so they had little to do with the day-to-day happenings of the village and were not engaged in the intricate network of personal ties and mutual dependency so essential to functional community life.

On the other hand, it has been illustrated here that the very nature of tenancy arrangements in El Bîr was so complex that people's responses to the changes in the status quo were often ambivalent and at times quite contradictory. That is, the differentiation between tenants and owners was not clearly defined, as most farmers accessed land through multiple and diverse holding types. As in other parts of the Egyptian countryside, there were both well-off tenants and poor tenants in El Bîr; wealthy owners who hired seasonal wage labour and owned expensive machinery, as well as poorer owners who needed wage work to survive. There were also part-time farmers who either owned or rented small plots of land, but whose main income was derived from government employment or by running small businesses. Many smallholders farmed their own land, rented out a small plot, rented in another, and exchanged their labour or work for wages on other people's land.

Therefore the distinction between those who benefited from Law 96's implementation and those who lost out was not always clear-cut. A significant proportion of smallholders, for instance, had rented land at minimal cost before October 1997, so they had been hard hit by the sharp rise in rents since then, as had the pure tenants.<sup>4</sup> However, it was never denied in El Bîr that certain members of the community had suffered more than others, particularly widows and the old or infirm who had no alternative means of survival other than the land. Yet there was a strong feeling among the villagers of 'tit for tat' in the wake of Law 96's implementation. That is, the owners had been 'in an unfair position' (*mutazalim*) before 1997 because they had been denied their rights and now it was the tenants who were oppressed (*mazlumîn*) for the very same reason.

Indeed the ambiguous manner in which the farmers viewed the events of October 1997 indicates that they did not have a united cause. In light of this, the case for potentially widespread and violent rural revolts made by both opponents and supporters of Law 96 in the build up to its implementation was misconstrued. This is not to say that the poorer fellahin did not resent their

wealthy counterparts. However, given the high levels of interdependency that formed the basis of the tenancy web in the countryside, as well as the sophisticated mechanisms of social control, it is understandable why the anger of the dispossessed was not readily targeted at local symbols of power. In this specific context, it was less risky for the dispossessed to channel their dissent against high ranking government officials, whose lives were far removed from the daily concerns of rural dwellers. Hence the so-called threat of rural revolt was little more than a convenient excuse for local agents of the regime to reassert their personal claims to authority, while it is clear that they were the main instigators of violent action. And their localised agendas did not necessarily correspond to the interests of other state actors, nor did they correspond remotely to the interests of the vast majority of Egyptian smallholders.

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<sup>4</sup> As Scott once noted, 'Each of the important shifts in tenure and production creates not only victims and beneficiaries, but also a substantial stratum of people whose interests are not easily discerned'. (Scott 1985, p. 244)