

Introduction

“Every nation has its own private violence... after a while one can feel at home and sheltered between almost any borders – you grow accustomed to anything.”

A Guest of Honour, Nadine Gordimer, p. 187

In the nineties, the growing number of violent confrontations between the Egyptian state and Islamic militants with allegedly widespread support in the countryside provided the necessary justification for the tightening of security measures. This was embodied in the 1992 amendments made to the penal code which introduced the notion of ‘terrorism’ for the first time and enabled the state to arrest and detain members of the opposition parties who supported the farmers’ cause in the months preceding October 1st 1997. In this way, the threat of rural revolt could always be used as a legitimate motive for local state actors to ‘contain’ any potential disturbances, although the manner in which they went about it was anything but legitimate.

So when Law 96 was fully implemented in the Egyptian countryside in 1997, the sanctioning of private violence by state agents enabled a process of active collusion between the latter and influential power brokers at the local level. In addition, there were numerous violations committed by the police and state security forces, such as the use of intimidation, detention, and in many cases, torture, in order to make leaseholders sign deeds of cessation, harvest their crops early, or leave their land without appropriate compensation, while denying them the right to litigation.¹ Indeed, the transitional period provided ample opportunity for old scores to be settled and new claims of authority to be made. It was the perfect occasion for anyone with the right connections to ‘reassert’ his or her ownership rights by whatever means available. If Mubarak’s regime had been willing or able to reign in its more enthusiastic proponents, it is certain that fewer incidents of this nature would have occurred.

But the fact that reports of intimidation and torture were downplayed by the government, which euphemised instead about ‘containment of rural unrest’ and the ‘upholding of law and order’ came as little surprise. It certainly was not the first time that the boundaries between fiction and

¹ Ismail 1998, pp.77, 78; LCHR 2002, p. 126

reality had been deliberately blurred. After all, the divorce between texts and actions on the part of the regime was by no means unknown to the Egyptian public. Yet the state's effectiveness in preventing such events from occurring was greatly limited from the outset, as much of the violence that erupted in the countryside resulted from local power agendas taking on a dynamic of their own. After all, loyalty to the regime was only one of the many loyalties that officials had. As Mitchell points out, "Power is not simply a centralized force seeking local allies as it extends out from the political centre but is constructed locally, whatever the wider connections involved."² In this study, it will be shown that the notion of private violence is particularly appropriate for the situation that unfolded during that period. Private in the sense that no open acknowledgment was made in the public domain of the incidents that occurred, and private because of the personal loyalties and localised interests that motivated the acts of violence.

Despite the fact that landholding issues became particularly contentious with the enactment of Law 96, however, there was far less violence than had been anticipated by most observers. Therefore, accounting for the lack of conflict within village communities, is just as important as trying to understand the various disputes that arose during the transitional period. On the one hand, the repressive mechanisms put in place by a brutal state apparatus effectively crushed all forms of protest initiated by those who resisted the law's implementation. On the other, any explanation of an absence of contention over Law 96 should consider the fundamental role played by the convoluted network of individual allegiances and specific concerns of those involved in the tenancy web: that is, the 'complex set of social, economic and political relationships' which the majority of Egypt's small farmers engage in.³

Just as personal loyalties and interests motivated the acts of violence perpetrated by local power brokers in one village setting, so they influenced the dynamics of acquiescence and adjustment that emerged in a different setting, such as that of El Bîr village, which is the main case study sample. Similar to Luhmann's systems theoretical approach to conflict, this thesis illustrates, therefore, how the broader social explanations for conflict do not necessarily correspond to its direct causes at the local and interpersonal level.⁴ As in many other parts of the Egyptian

² He continues as follows: "Seen from the perspective of the fields, the state becomes a more complex set of relations. These no longer appear primarily in the form of a central power intervening to initiate change, but as local practices of regulation, policing, and coercion that sustain a certain level of inequality." (Mitchell 2002, pp. 168, 169)

³ Abdel Aal and Bush 2004, p. 1

⁴ See Luhmann 1995, *Social Systems*

countryside, a high degree of reciprocity in El Bîr ensures that implicit expectations of solidarity and obligations to the community are subscribed to, at least in the public domain, by all who are enmeshed in the tenancy web. Hence, when the new law was introduced, there were multiple and often conflicting interests at stake which cannot be simplified into an issue of ‘winners’ versus ‘losers’. So while the land issue became highly politicised in the capital, with members of the opposition forces propagating the myth of a *fellah* rebellion, at the same time as proponents of the law warned about the dangers of widespread rural violence; in the Egyptian countryside, the implementation of Law 96 did not hold such significance for the development of collective action. This did not mean that power brokers at the local and national level did not take the opportunity to brand every form of opposition to the law, whether peaceful or otherwise, as an excuse to call for preventative action on the part of the security forces to stamp out the threat of ‘terrorist’ acts. But if the complex nature of tenancy relations had been taken into account by the law’s propagators, the potential for reasonable settlements to be reached peacefully may have been realized.

Very little research at the village level has been done so far on the issue of local power politics and Law 96’s implementation. Indeed most case studies about the new law have tended to be largely descriptive, such as the material collated by the Land Centre for Human Rights (LCHR), or have focused on the law’s major political and/or socio-economic implications, such as the work of Mohammed Abdel Aal, Ray Bush, Reem Saad and Kirsten Bach.⁵ The main aim of this study, therefore, is to provide not only a more comprehensive but also an alternative reading of the power dynamics at play from a micro perspective when Law 96 was introduced in one region of the Egyptian Delta, that is, the governorate of Daqahliya. The thesis shows how rural power agendas were not uniform as different parts of Daqahliya experienced different processes of conflict and conflict avoidance. Hence the notion of ‘local power dynamics’ was chosen as a key point of reference, as this highlights the view that power relations in the Egyptian countryside are by no means static, nor can their particularity and complexity be emphasised enough.

⁵ See studies published in Bush (ed.) 2002, *Counter-Revolution in Egypt’s Countryside*

The structure of the thesis

In Section I of the thesis, the core theme to be explored will be that of personal power agendas and the dynamics of violence when Law 96 was implemented in the Egyptian countryside, and in particular, the governorate of Daqahliya. Another key issue here will be the central manner in which land was politicised in the build-up to October 1997, as opposed to its deliberate de-politicisation on the part of the regime once the deadline had been passed. First, however, important background information on the new tenancy bill will be provided in Chapter 1, in which the politics of Egypt's recent drive towards 'agricultural modernisation' will be examined. Chapter 2 will concentrate on the public discourse surrounding the incidents of land-related violence that occurred when Law 96 was fully enacted, in contrast to the actual practices of local government agents and other interested power brokers at the village level as presented in Chapter 3. Eckert's concept of violence as a direct means of power will be built upon here, as influential members of the village community strengthened their hold on authority through acts of intimidation with the full support of the police and state security forces.⁶ Unlike the classical case of the Mafiosi in Sicily where representatives of private violence gained over the state, it will be shown that the conditions in the Egyptian countryside for local partnerships between state and non-state actors to be maintained were strong.

Section II of the thesis will be dedicated to narratives of contention and avoidance concerning Law 96's implementation in one village of Daqahliya governorate, that is, El Bîr. In this part, the main ethnographic material will be presented. As Elwert has argued, it will be demonstrated that despite the village's initial self-representation as being relatively conflict-free, the more one delved into the procedures related to the daily transgression of norms, the more it became clear that latent conflicts were present in El Bîr.⁷ In Chapter 4, an in-depth analysis of evolving patterns of land tenure will serve as an introduction to the micro cosmos of the village. Chapters 5 and 6 will deal more specifically with the farmers' responses to the implementation of the new law itself. The focus here will be the perceived 'non-negotiability' of Law 96, on the one hand, and the complex nature of tenancy arrangements in El Bîr, on the other, as core explanations of conflict avoidance. The concluding chapter will then draw together the major strands of the thesis

⁶ See Eckert 2003, *The Charisma of Direct Action*

⁷ See Elwert 2001, "Conflict: Anthropological Perspectives"

by reintroducing the notion of private violence and the fiction of rural revolt as a fundamental framework for analysis of the local power dynamics at play when Law 96 was implemented in the Egyptian countryside.

Methodology

This study combines an ethnographic approach employing largely qualitative methods with a socio-political analysis of the broader historical context. During the course of the two and a half years spent in Egypt, the fieldwork was conducted in a series of different stages. This included a preliminary impact study undertaken with the help of three local researchers, in order to gain a quantitative overview of the key issues to be elaborated upon. Once these had been defined, an appropriate village was selected for the second phase of the fieldwork. In-depth and participatory interviewing techniques were particularly useful for this part, as it enabled the constant reassessment of theoretical questions as they were tested on the ground.

Choosing the area and access to the field

The most extensive period of fieldwork was conducted in the village of El Bîr in Daqahliya governorate. El Bîr is a fairly representative sample of the villages located in this region with regards to population size, education levels and key sources of employment. The choice of interviewees was determined by a number of selection criteria, the main aim being to include all categories of small farmers. That is, both tenants and/or owners farming either part time or full time on an average area of 2.5 feddans. The sample also included a proportion of landless farm labourers, in addition to wealthy villagers owning and renting over 5 feddans. The latter were often prominent community leaders or were actively involved in local political affairs.

Access to the field was facilitated by the extended period of stay in the village itself. I was hosted by my assistant researcher and her family who were respected members of the local community. Most interviews were conducted with farmers in their fields, although there were numerous occasions for informal discussions with extended family members and friends. As women spent less time on the land than their husbands or brothers, it was easier to talk to them in their homes. Initially, interviews were set up with the help of my host family, but these contacts were broadened rapidly through coincidental meetings in the fields or in the streets of El Bîr.

Field specific problems

An official permit is the standard requirement for locals or foreigners wishing to conduct research in the Egyptian countryside. However, any studies undertaken on issues that are considered to be sensitive by the government, such as poverty and unemployment or discrimination against minority groups, tend to be strongly censored or simply not allowed. Therefore, no attempt was made to obtain official permission to undertake fieldwork in El Bîr. This meant that great care needed to be taken to avoid a visit from the state security. Hence a relationship of trust on both sides needed to be established from day one between myself and the interviewees.

This task was made easier by covering a wide range of topics during the interviews so that people did not feel they were merely being quizzed about problems in their village. Furthermore, it was helpful to assure interviewees that strict confidentiality would be observed. If farmers were reluctant to talk about tensions arising from the new tenancy law, interview questions would have to be rephrased or postponed for a subsequent interview. Thus, repeated interviewing was essential to obtain a comprehensive overview of social dynamics within the village community. It was impossible, however, to access any official figures of changes in registered landholdings in El Bîr from the local cooperative despite attempts made on various occasions.

Sources of data: Interviews, group discussions, participant observation

Interviews

The study in El Bîr relies on data gathered through three main types of interviewing methods: the use of *concept interviews, problem-centred interviews and unstructured narrative interviews*. Concept interviews helped to introduce the research topic to the interviewees by asking them to define fundamental concepts, such as farming and the land, property rights, or notions of reconciliation and conflict. Problem-centred interviews enabled comparisons to be made between differing opinions expressed by people of varying socio-economic status about the implementation of the new law. Unstructured narrative interviews during which the topics to be discussed were determined by the interviewees themselves, were helpful in analysing the way in which certain issues would be prioritised over others. It also provided useful insights into specific group dynamics that developed as the interviewees became more and more involved in the

discussion at hand.

A quantitative questionnaire was used for the preliminary impact analysis conducted in six villages (three in Lower Egypt and three in Upper Egypt). The research team (including myself and three others) addressed key issues through the use of constraint charts and standard forms in combination with open-ended questions (see Appendix VII). The open-ended questions allowed for greater flexibility regarding the subject matter, as well as stimulating the most interesting discussions.

All of the interviews were conducted in colloquial Egyptian Arabic apart from some of the expert interviews which were done in English. The majority of interviews were noted down during the interview, with the excellent translation of my research assistant whenever necessary, while five of the concept interviews were taped. However, some interviews were noted down from memory so as not to inhibit people, particularly when incidents of police intimidation or violence were being discussed.

Quantitative overview of interviewees

Altogether 134 interviews were conducted for this study with mainly low- to medium-income farmers owning and/or renting on average 2.5 feddans. In addition, a number of low-income landless fellahin were interviewed, as well as medium-income owner-operators running small businesses. The interviewees were either full-time or part-time farmers engaged in various off-farm activities, ranging from agricultural wage labour to government employment. During the initial phase of the research, 40 interviews were conducted with men and 20 with women in six different villages. In El Bîr, 52 individual interviews with 38 men and 14 women were conducted. Six of the interviewees were Coptic and the remaining 48 were Muslim. Fourteen of the interviewees were low-income tenant farmers or landless wage labourers; 28 were low- to medium-income owner-tenant farmers; while 10 were medium-income owner-operators and government employees or entrepreneurs. Twelve group interviews were conducted with the group size ranging from 6 to 15 farmers. The majority of group interviewees were low- to medium-income tenant and tenant-owner farmers. All the group interview participants were men apart from one woman farmer (a widow). Another 10 interviews were conducted with victims of police violence who resisted Law 96's implementation, in order to supplement data already

gathered for Daqahliya governorate by the Land Centre for Human Rights.⁸

Repeated interviewing

As mentioned above, many key informants were interviewed more than once. This helped to build up a relationship of trust with them, so that they were no longer concerned with strategies of image building or neutralisation of problematic issues. It also facilitated the verification of facts over a process of time, in order to compare contradictory versions of specific events.

Expert interviews

Furthermore, a series of interviews were conducted with experts who had a professional interest in recent developments regarding the introduction of Law 96. These included journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, academics, employees of the Ministry of Agriculture, and development workers from GTZ, USAID and WFP. These individuals gave important background information on the events of 1997 and 1998, as well as useful advice on how best to access the field. As most of them were actively engaged in the field themselves, their contrasting views and agendas provided further insights on the subject matter itself.

Informal group discussions

Many informal group discussions arose when interviewees were joined by their friends and relatives. It was interesting to observe how certain individuals felt more confident in a group setting than in a one-to-one situation which they could find intimidating. However, women had to be interviewed on their own or in the presence of other women as they tended to keep quiet in a mixed group discussion, although this was not always the case. Informal group discussions were particularly insightful when heated arguments over related issues developed spontaneously. By allowing interviewees to take over the centre stage on these occasions, some of the best results were obtained.

Participant observation

Participant observation was fundamental to the understanding of key aspects of village life, such as the fulfilment of social obligations and other unspoken norms that influenced people's daily practices and interactions. It also provided numerous opportunities for informal chats about the same issues referred to during formal interviews. In addition, it was the most effective way to talk

⁸ See Appendix IX for more details.

to women as they often had less time to spare than their male counterparts. As we chatted, they loved teaching me how to prepare tastier versions of typical national dishes, such as *mahshi* (stuffed vegetables), *tâm'iya* (balls of mashed chickpeas and spices), *molochiyya* (leafy green soup) or the fine pastries baked for the Ramadan festivities. Many hot summer nights were pleasantly whiled away eating water melon and drinking tea on the cool stone steps of the villagers' houses, or accepting invitations to partake in a glass of fresh sugar-cane juice by the canal. Few visits were made to the local cafés as this was strictly a male domain. Numerous other occasions, however, provided the opportunity to be in mixed company, such as shared meals during Eid or on shopping trips to nearby towns.

Moreover, observations of important agricultural activities over the changing seasons helped to fill in knowledge gaps about local farming practices. Being present during the transplantation of rice seedlings or at harvesting time provided a rare opportunity to interview landless wage labourers. The latter were otherwise difficult to meet as most of them spent long periods away from the village. In general, a genuine show of interest in the daily work around the home or in the fields put the villagers at ease and prompted them to ask questions about farming practices or other relevant subjects in my own country. This enabled a more equal process of information exchange which greatly enhanced the quality of subsequent interviews that were conducted.

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Section I: Personal Power Agendas and the Dynamics of Violence