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Local Activism in post-2011 Egypt

→ Nadine Abdalla



Residents of al-Warraq Island in the south of Cairo facing the security forces to protest the demolition of their homes, © Momen Samir



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How do Egyptians contest the quotidian authoritarianism, the often-overbearing regulatory regime and ordinary governance inadequacies? Analysts in Egypt and outside have paid little attention to matters of local governance in the absence (since 2011) of elected local councils. (A Cairo administrative court dissolved the existing councils in June 2011 and elections to replace them never occurred.) While the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and the elected local councils were dissolved for being corrupt, – at least in part reflecting the “revolutionary” demands coming from Tahrir Square – nothing replaced these channels of representation.

Neither the NDP nor the elected councils, in fact, acted as democratic or representative bodies under Mubarak. Rather, through their clientelist networks, they served simply as channels of communication between state and society. Through those networks, they managed – to an extent – to absorb and/or appease social grievances before they escalated. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, several political groups (including youth groups) perceived local elections as a crucial way to democratise the political system from below; and even considered that holding these elections would offer them an opportunity for learning politics from below and practising it on the local level. But these elections were never held.

Serious shortcomings in local governance today manifest themselves to some extent in mounting grievances ranging from the deterioration of social services to the lack of any developmental urban vision. Against this background, various forms of local activism embodying different mobilising structures have emerged since 2011. This article examines three examples, based in three different neighbourhoods in Giza and Cairo, resorting to different structures and repertoires of action. All have a common goal: challenging authoritarian, inefficient, and in one instance predatory, governance that neglects their rightful call for inclusion and development and pays little attention to their needs. These three movements share the goals of resisting exclusionary urban policies while addressing a major problem – the absence of political means to register growing frustration at the



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local level when authorities have closed channels for conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation, given the absence of local councils since 2011 and the shrunken political space since 2014.

Research on activism post-2011 in Egypt has focused predominantly on labour and youth movements on the national level and rarely examined their framings, mobilising structures, types of alliances and strategies for socio-political inclusion on the local level. In spite of the important role played by some “local committees” (*al-legan al-shaa’ebia*) and similar activism during the 2011 uprising and in its aftermath, researchers have not tackled how these entities have evolved since. If we can say the 20 September 2019 protests were triggered by “young urban poor”, what do we know about local activism in different neighbourhoods fighting unjust governance?

My first example is the Popular Coalition of Ard al-Liwaa (PCAL) (*el-i’tila’af al-sha’by le-ard al-liwaa*), founded on 18 February 2011, in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings, by five young residents of Ard al- Liwaa, an informal area in Giza governorate's Agouza district. The PCAL’s main aim was to plan, propose and implement developmental projects. A few months after its founding, it had grown to around 30 members. Ard- al- Liwaa suffers from decades of neglect, bad governance and lack of infrastructure. They have resorted to lobbying to exert pressure on local authorities (i.e., the Giza governorate) as well as the national authorities to implement projects, which range from infrastructure upgrading (i.e., paving and lighting the area) to more developmental projects (for example, turning the last 12 feddans of empty land into what they called “a developmental complex” which would include a school, a hospital, a cultural space and gardens to serve the residents). The PCAL has succeeded in June 2014, through its lobbying efforts, to implement the project of paving and lighting Ard al-Liwaa. This project was funded by the Fund for Slum Development (*sanduk tatwir al-ashwaeyat*) affiliated to the Council of Ministers. (Since its foundation in 2008, the fund has worked on supporting several projects in informal areas in collaboration with the designated governorate.)

Since the end of 2015, the situation has changed, as local authorities (i.e., the new governor of Giza), as well as the central government, increasingly disregarded the PCAL. This is not only due to the constriction of political space post-2014 but also



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to the decrease of their own bargaining power after parliament refused to enact a court of cassation ruling which confirmed the right of their elected deputy to take his seat in the 2015 parliament (the parliamentary elections were held in October-December 2015). The deputy had been their principal ally after his election to the 2012 parliament. To face this exclusionary situation, some of the founders of the PCAL pursued a strategy of diversifying political alliances by negotiating, for instance, leadership positions inside of the Conservative Party (*Hizb al-Muhafezin*), whose president is a member of the 2015 parliament. This should help them channel their grievances and also turn their social capital (or the social base they have managed to build among the residents of Ard al-Liwaa through the services they offer to them) into political capital in upcoming local elections (whenever they are held).

My second case involves the mobilisation of the residents of al-Warraq, an informal area comprising a small Nile island in the Giza governorate. Under the guise of dealing with the problem of informal areas and slums, the government decided in June 2017 to evict the island's 60,000 residents since its location on the Nile makes it attractive to private Egyptian and foreign investors. (The government cited a similar rationale a few months earlier, in March 2017, when it moved to evict the residents of the informal area of Maspero in downtown Cairo, strategically located along the Nile). On 16 July 2017, security forces invaded al-Warraq island to start the eviction process. Huge demonstrations and protests erupted as a reaction to this. Clashes between police and inhabitants led to the death of one of the protesters during these protests. This fuelled anger and protests even further. On 27 January 2017, 74 families of the families on the island founded the Council for the Families of al-Warraq (*majlis aa'eilat al-warraq*). The Council acted as a representative body for the inhabitants to enable them to continue negotiations with government representatives while organising demonstrations in the meantime to exert pressure on the authorities. On 29 October 2017, this council established a Facebook page to disseminate updates in this contentious situation even in circumstances where media freedom remains highly constrained.

Today, the eviction process continues in the face of fewer confrontations between residents and security forces. While the inhabitants of al-Warraq have dreamt of social inclusion and development, the political authorities - who aim to gentrify



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the region - seek to exclude them, sending them off to New Cities far from their work and means of subsistence. Almost similar to the case of Maspero, authorities said residents could choose between moving to rental flats in the 6th of October City located in al- Giza governorate (around 50 km from al- Warraq) or al-Obour City located in Qaliyoubia governorate north-east of Cairo (around 40 km from al-Warraq), both hardly accessible and expensive by public or private transportation, or accepting financial compensation. However, the proposed compensation remains insufficient to buy a new flat.

The third case involves residents of one of the middle-class bourgeois areas of al-Nozha district, on the periphery of the older Cairo neighbourhood of Heliopolis. While the area does not suffer from social marginalisation as do the other two neighbourhoods, it lacks the political means to address the increasing insecurity and the growing informality the neighbourhood is witnessing. Examples of this are the increasing number of street vendors, the failure of district authorities (*riaa'sit al-hay*) to plant trees in public spaces, the spread of street dogs, and a disturbing increase in thefts. While the residents do not yet have any structure that represents them, social media serves as a platform for sharing and discussing ideas on how to collectively confront the problems that the inhabitants are facing. These groups on social media offer a possibility for social networking that is a basic step toward an efficient lobbying process. Through social media, residents have organised several initiatives such as an Iftar during Ramadan, a marathon, and neighbourhood football teams. While these initiatives have immediate social aims, some of them have a longer-term goal, which is to exploit these social networks to increase pressure on local authorities to meet the residents' demands.

To conclude, despite the relative strength of the state in Egypt (at least in comparison to some neighbouring countries) governance on the local level suffers from a considerable lack of efficacy and efficiency. On the one hand, the increasing consolidation of the Egyptian regime's authoritarian rule post-2014 has centralised governance-related decisions and made them even less transparent and more representative of the mindset and interests of the ruling elite, as opposed to people's needs and demands. On the other hand, the restriction which the state puts on the means of conventional political participation (i.e., political



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parties, NGOs, elections) and non-conventional participation (i.e., demonstrations and protests) makes the possibility of holding officials accountable - whether on the national or local level - almost impossible.

Furthermore, the rejection of the current regime of any elite-based channel of socio-political representation or mediation (i.e., a ruling party) – which would at least channel societal demands on a patron-client basis – increases the disconnect between state and society. The Mubarak regime relied on a ruling party, the NDP, as a tool of governance at the national and local levels as well as a channel for mediation with society – legislatively through parliament and more importantly through networks of clientelism and patronage in the municipalities. The current regime, in contrast, has refused to create such a mediating institution from the outset as demonstrated by President al-Sisi's November 2014 declaration that he had no intention of building such a ruling party. Hence, it is not a surprise that some urban areas of Egypt have seen the emergence of local movements such as those profiled here that aim to fight this mode of exclusionary governance.



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About the author

Nadine Abdalla

Assistant Professor of Sociology, American University in Cairo

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contact@arab-reform.net



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