Urban Rights and Local Politics in Egypt: The Case of the Maspero Triangle

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Introduction

In my visit to Egypt in late March 2018, two things were happening simultaneously: the demolition of Maspero Triangle, the neighbourhood I have been working on for my case study, and the re-election of President Abdel Fattah El Sisi for his second term. There was a big campaign banner, one of many engulfing Cairo, with El Sisi’s face and the slogan “You are the hope”. This banner on 6th of October bridge was overlooking the neighbourhood as the bulldozers were hard at work demolishing what was for years the homes of over 4000 families spanning generations. I was in a taxi trying inconspicuously to take pictures of the banner and wondering what my interlocutors would say when I ask them about how they view this promise of hope overlooking the destruction of their homes. I was also marvelling at the almost nonsensical sequence of events. In 2011 Maspero was one of the most militant neighbourhoods, among many in downtown and old Cairo (Ismail 2013), that defended the occupation of Tahrir Square. As it was adjacent to Tahrir, it played a crucial role in sustaining the square during the first 18 days of the uprising. Seven years after the revolution, the neighbourhood was faced with complete erasure. How did we get here? I argue for the productivity of looking at Egyptian politics through the lens of affect as a possible way to answer this question. As Laszczkowski and Reeves argue in their edited book Affective States (2017) “Affect is at the heart of those moments when the political catches us off guard or when it leaves us feeling catatonically suspended, wondering where we are, how we even go there, and when this became so ordinary”.

In this paper, I examine one such moment: the demolition of Maspero neighbourhood that coincided with the re-election of Abd El Fattah El Sisi in early 2018. I investigate state-society relations and the shifts throughout those moments by looking at how one neighbourhood negotiated their survival that culminated in their removal. Much like the wider socio-political context in Egypt and the story of the Egyptian revolution itself, Maspero is a story of a negotiated failure. A youth-led movement that demanded basic rights, exhausted various political tactics to lobby the government and failed the bigger fight, but scored some victories, such as the ability of some 900 families to come back to Maspero.
after the development project is over. I argue that Maspero can uncover much about the wider political tribulations since 2011. The case offers a lens through which we can see political openings and opportunities, clampdowns and closures as well as the current regime’s agenda for ensuring that what happened on 25 January 2011 does not happen again. I claim that one of the tactics of the regime is to systematically deconstruct the politics of the urban subaltern that played a major role in the revolution (Ismail 2013) through urban reconfiguration as well as new and old methods of affective co-optation and coercion.

In her analysis of state-society relations, Cilja Harders argues that “political science tends to privilege macro-level perspectives” rendering the urban subaltern as only passive subjects of political transformations (Harders 2003). I argue that this has not changed in analysing the aftermath of the revolution. Few studies discussed the role of the urban poor in the revolution; however, many scholars neglected the politicisation of the urban subaltern when analysing transformation (or lack thereof) in Egyptian politics in the last few years. After eight years, the situation seems bleak and the task futile. To argue for any kind of change, let alone transformation, one must be blind to the strong backlash against any attempt to capitalise on the temporary gains of the revolution. The only story left to be told seems to be one of failure. The utter failure of a reformist movement to impose even partially its agenda for change (Bayat 2017).

However, the case of Maspero neighbourhood and its youth alliance allow me to trace the revolution back into the everyday politics of citizens in a crushing struggle with the regime to examine whether the revolution disrupted informal traditional ways of doing politics. Rather than examine radical or even reformist regime or legal changes in national politics, I am interested in informal politics and its disruption. “It is in the local scale that power relations become tangible and abstract concepts such as ‘state’ and ‘politics’ observable” (Hoffmann, Bouziane & Harders 2013, 3). Building on the work of scholars of everyday politics, street politics and politics from below, I focus, therefore, on the street and, more specifically, Maspero, a neighbourhood adjacent to Tahrir Square that lived the revolution with all its tribulations, a neighbourhood that affected and was affected by the revolution.

I find Salwa Ismail’s work on the role of the urban subaltern in the revolution
productive in unpacking and tracing the “everyday” in the Egyptian revolution. “The infrastructures of mobilisation and protest lay in the microprocesses of everyday life at the quarter level, in their forms of governance and in the structure of feelings that developed in relation to state government” (Ismail 2012, 450). Ismail’s argument highlights the quarters or neighbourhoods as spatial political laboratories where the urban subaltern, through rigorous negotiations and “every day” encounters with the different arms of the state, accumulates knowledge about modes of governance and how to resist them. This was obvious in the role that the urban subaltern played in the revolution and was reflected in the narratives of my interlocutors and highlighted in some of the scholar’s accounts of the revolution. In Ismail’s (2012) account of the “backstreets of Tahrir”, she narrates several important “battles” in informal neighbourhoods that she believes were vital to the success of the revolution. These “battles” manifest the moment of convergence between locally grounded grievances and national revolutionary politics. “The account of the battles serves to draw attention to the place of popular quarters in the geography of resistance, and to the spatial inscription of popular modes of activism”. (Ismail 2012, 446) The importance of Ismail’s account is in linking popular resistance to the spatial characteristics of the quarter, which brings up the question of what will happen to popular resistance when the neighbourhood is gone.

I argue that the removal of entire neighbourhoods has a political purpose, that of dismantling the political laboratories and crushing street politics. In discussing the battles in Tahrir, Bulaq Abu Al-Ila features prominently in sheltering activists, defending the occupation of the square and engaging in prolonged street fights that exhausted the police and kept it from reclaiming the square. Ismail (2012, 448) links the neighbourhood’s repertoire of contention to a history of patriotism that goes back to the resistance of the French colonial conquest, again highlighting a spatially bounded accumulation of generational knowledge and affective register of popular resistance. The aim of my endeavour is not just to highlight the role of the urban subaltern in the revolution and the subsequent politicisation and depoliticization and what one may learn from it. It is also to link this to what the state has been learning about countering any possible future mobilisation in order to foresee state strategies of radically altering the “every day” modes of governance and with it modes of resistance and to connect this to the urgency of
urban restructuring processes happening in Cairo on an unprecedented scale since the 1990s.

Asef Bayat (2012) explores the politics of the urban subaltern in “neoliberal cities” in an authoritarian regime. Bayat offers the concept of “social non-movements” to analyse street politics (2012, 119). According to him, the streets are vital to the urban subaltern: he writes that “[t]he centrality of streets goes beyond merely the expression of contention. Rather, streets may actually serve as an indispensable asset/capital for them to subsist and reproduce economic as well as cultural life” (2012, 119). Bayat describes the ongoing conflict over the public space between the state and the urban subaltern as “street politics” (Bayat 2009). These ongoing processes consequently create the “political street”, hence, politicising ordinary citizens through their struggles over urban space. Some of the questions that arise here and reflect the limitations of Bayat’s arguments in this point of history relate to what happens to “street politics” when the urban subaltern loses the “political street”. Reflecting on the case of Maspero neighbourhood, what happens to the politicisation and cultural and economic appropriation when they are relocated to Asmarat, a far-off gated community out of central Cairo? What happens to the politics of the urban poor when they lose their “capital”? And, what kind of political and spatial affects are tied to this dispossession?

One of the challenges of studying Maspero was to understand the affective attachments that people had to the neighbourhood. Drawing from the literature on street politics and Asef Bayat’s notion of encroachment (2009), I could understand materially the reasons why forcefully displacing people from their homes could be traumatic. However, as I witnessed them mourn the neighbourhood it became clear to me that there are reasons beyond what this literature can offer. Here, affect theories can be helpful. Yael Navaro Yashin calls for “a reconceptualization of the relation between human beings and space” (2012, 16). Yashin critiques what she calls “the social-constructionist imagination” in its focus on conceptualising space only through what humans project on it. Building on Teresa Brennan’s work on the transmission of affect, Yashin argues for affective relationality between humans and their environment. However, she does not take an object-centred approach but combines the human subjective approach with one that explores that “excess” in the environment that she studies
through the lens of affect. Yashin’s work on the collision of the phantasmatic and the material is essential in understanding the “affect” of the neighbourhood. According to Yashin, “the make-believe is real” (2012, 10). Reflecting on the case of Maspero, the affective attachments that the inhabitants of the neighbourhood developed was built around the material, the encroachment, and the social networks but moved beyond this. To them, Maspero is their country and their home. Below one of my research interlocutors, a male resident of Maspero in his 30s explains to me the attachment of the people to Maspero Triangle.

“We belong to this place; it is part of us, and we are a part of it. This place holds our memories and childhood. This is something that officials never understood. But we felt it. In this place I used to play, when I am upset, I like to sit in this place and talk to my friends. We are attached to this place not just because it is close to our work. We are linked spiritually to this place; our hearts are attached to this place. I do not want to go out. I do not want to live even in Zamalek, which is very close to us. I do not want to live there. We are attached to this place.”

Nigel Thrift (2007) argues that for the political importance of studying affect in cities and affective cities to trace how affect and cities interact to produce politics. The interactions between space, bodies and affect are linked to political consequences. Thrift goes further to point to the political engineering of affect in urban everyday life and what might seem to us as aesthetic is politically instrumentalised. This engineering of affect can have various political aims. To erase emotional histories, create new affective registers or mobilise old ones in urban settings through urban restructuring (Thrift 2007, 172). Thus, it is not farfetched to argue that the urban restructuring of cities is linked to eliciting or inhibiting political responses. The massive plan of the Egyptian government to drastically change downtown Cairo, a space that witnessed a revolution has interlinked political and affective goals. It aims at erasing the affective register of the 2011 Egyptian revolution and inhibits the politics of the urban poor.

**Research methods**

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the framework of the research project “Political Participation, Emotion and Affect in the Context of Socio-Political Rights and Local Politics in Egypt: The Case of the Maspero Triangle”
Transformations” funded by the Federal German Research Foundation (DFG). The project analyses the importance of emotional and affective dynamics for political participation during the mass protests of “Tahrir” (2011) and “Taksim” (2013) in Egypt and Turkey. The data in this paper were collected over two years between 2016 and 2018 during fieldwork for my PhD thesis. I used ethnographic methods such as participatory observation of the activities of the Maspero youth alliance and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with the leaders and participants of Maspero alliance and the Bulaq Abu Al-Ila neighbourhood committee. I also conducted a field visit to Asmarat and interviewed residents from Maspero Triangle who were located there.

A brief history of Maspero Triangle: organising locally against forced eviction

According to the Informal Settlements Development Fund (ISDF), the neighbourhood of Maspero Triangle is considered an unsafe area due to unsuitable living conditions. The Maspero Triangle is in the south of Bulaq Abu Al-Ila district in downtown Cairo, adjacent to Tahrir Square and two ministries, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union headquarters and the Foreign Affairs Ministry. Since the early 1990s, residents of Maspero neighbourhood were fighting forcible evictions and relocation and calling for the development of the area with the residents at the heart of the development project. Omnia Khalil (2018) argues that even though the removal of Maspero neighbourhood was portrayed as a participatory development project, it turned out to be a process of forced evictions that aims at gentrifying the area. The Maspero Triangle is a historical area dating back to 1400, a fact that the residents and my research interlocutors were often keen to highlight and took a lot of pride in. The earthquake in 1992 affected Maspero Triangle as well as most historical areas in Cairo. Several houses needed repairs, however, the government refused to grant maintenance licenses to the owners and tenants. One of the residents of Maspero recounted to me his experience in trying to repair his house.

“Since 1992 we were not allowed to repair our houses. Whenever I went and asked...
in the local council or in the governorate about the possibility of renovating my house, they said it was prohibited. When I asked why, they said because this area is under planning. They gave us no further information. (…). The plan was that the house falls on your head so that they can empty the area around the houses that have fallen. This way they can empty the triangle and sell it to the companies. In 2008, two houses fell on the people due to lack of repairs. Whoever attempted to repair their houses were penalised and could face prison. To live in safety in this country with your children, you risk being punished.”

As the narrative above highlights, 2008 was a turning point in Maspero neighbourhood. Cairo governorate intensified forced evacuations because of unsafe housing conditions. To organize themselves and coordinate a response, the youth of the Maspero Triangle established the “The voluntary alliance of the youth and people of Maspero in defence of the land and housing rights”. In the below data excerpt, one of the founders of the alliance tells the story of how they started.

“In 2008 two houses fell, a man, his wife and kids died, which created a lot of anger, so we wanted to take a stance, we started to reach out to officials and to other residents who were already filing lawsuits. We had an idea to establish an organisation and we started working on this, we were four or five of like-minded young individuals. People were scared especially of repression because there was no political freedom at the time. We agreed to establish a space for us, we called it ‘The voluntary alliance of the youth and people of Maspero in defence of the land and housing rights’ some people thought we were crazy and others thought we will definitely get arrested. But we decided to establish this alliance and see what we can do with the people. We started to talk to the families in Maspero and local leaders and tell them about our ideas and what we aim to do; some people were supportive, and others thought we were crazy. After a few months, we started collecting signatures against forced evictions from the people in Maspero. We started the slogan ‘Yes to development, no to forced evictions’. We were not against developing the area as long as it developed with us, we were against forcible removal of the people and we started explaining this idea to the people, officials and journalists. We wanted to stay in the area. We collected more than 4000 signatures. (…). When we founded the alliance, we started to develop criteria of how to share power in the alliance and we divided roles and responsibilities. We
wanted to have someone from every street or alley so that everyone is represented and that what we say reaches every home so we can raise awareness among people and that our discussions reach the whole of the Triangle. We had the idea to create a page on Facebook, which was something very important and enabled us to communicate with people in Maspero and outside such as journalists and human rights activists. The alliance started to become known as well as the Maspero case. We wanted to be inclusive of everyone in the area and we wanted to be an alliance that is from the people, not an outside organisation that speaks on behalf of the people, the alliance was a space that was run by the people in Maspero.”

In the same year, The Egyptian government proposed an urban transformation plan called Cairo 2050 in which the goals to gentrify Maspero Triangle and turn it into a tourist centre were obvious.

**Maspero in the revolution: disrupting old political and social orders and opening new spaces for mobilisation**

In 2011 Maspero neighbourhood was one of the most militant neighbourhoods, among many in downtown and old Cairo (Ismail 2013), that defended the occupation of Tahrir Square. As it was adjacent to Tahrir, it played a crucial role in sustaining the square during the 18 days. Below one of the residents of Bulaq Abu Al-Ila described their role during the revolution.

“Our role during the ‘Friday of rage’ on 28 January 2011 was to facilitate the mission of those who wanted to reach Tahrir Square. We are considered the centre and anyone who wants to reach the square must pass from here and the police were hammering us. We were helping people to get there and telling them about alleys and other streets they could go through so that they do not get lost. The same thing happened in Maspero Triangle”

Another resident from Maspero Triangle narrated how the neighbourhood lived the revolution.
“The triangle was with us (the revolutionaries). This was obvious on 28 January; the area became a big hospital for protesters due to its proximity to the square. There was no food left in stores, all the medication was used from the pharmacies and all the small clinics opened their doors for the injured. You feel that the revolution started here. The entrance to Tahrir started from Maspero Triangle, the protesters and the revolutionaries had an area to protect them. Protesters had a place to go and hide if they were injured or if they needed anything and they felt that the people of Maspero were with them because these people also had an injustice. On 24 January 2011 Maspero Triangle and Bulaq Abu Al-Ila were the first areas after Suez to clash with the security forces. Maspero became a shelter for activists and revolutionaries. From 24 to 28 January, we did not go home, and people came from other informal areas to support us. We were all scared, the clashes were huge, and it was the biggest clash against the Ministry of Interior. All the people in the neighbourhood were together as one.”

The 2011 Egyptian revolution revamped local politics and the youth of Maspero capitalised on this mobilisation to advocate for their cause. A researcher who has been working on Maspero commented on the situation in the area after the revolution.

“Since 2008 the people in the area were really humiliated but since 25 January, they held a lot of pride in the fact that they helped many protesters who were hiding and running away from the police during the 18 days. (...) The people from Maspero community started to organise sit-ins and demonstrations and block roads only after the revolution; they never could have been able to do that before the revolution”

Moreover, following the collapse of two houses in December 2011 the Maspero alliance organised a protest on the Nile Corniche. One of my interlocutors explains, “On 4 December 2011 a house fell due to their [the state] policies and the non-maintenance rules and some people died. We held a meeting with the people in the area and on 9 December 2011, we held a peaceful protest in front of Maspero building. The protest resulted in meetings with officials.” Nevertheless, these meetings did not lead to any results. In 2013, Madd Platform, a team of independent urban scholar and architects, started a participatory project in cooperation with the Egyptian Center for Civil and Legislative Reform (ECCLR) and
the Maspero alliance to explore the possibilities of developing the area without the forcible evictions of the residents. Moreover, they worked closely with the then newly established Ministry of Urban Renewal and Informal Settlement that was headed by Laila Eskandar. The residents of Maspero repeatedly mentioned that during this time they had renewed hope and faith that the neighbourhood will develop with them. They highlighted that Eskandar visited the area frequently and often talked to people. The alliance organised several conferences in the area; they had faith in the development project and most residents expressed their wishes to stay in the area after the development. Things seemed to be going in favour of developing the area while ensuring the housing rights of residents. The ministry – in collaboration with Madd Platform and other partners – initiated an international competition for the Maspero development project and a British company won the bid. However, there was a ministerial change in 2016 and the Ministry of Urban Renewal and Informal Settlement was removed. The Maspero development project went back to the ISDF and the Ministry of Housing who had a very different philosophy in approaching the project and dealing with the residents. At this point, residents started to lose faith in the process and in the government’s commitment to sustaining their housing rights while developing their neighbourhood. After years of confusion and uncertainty about the future of the area and its residents amid rumours of forced evictions, in 2017 the deputy minister of housing held a meeting with Maspero residents and announced three alternatives. The first was a financial compensation of up to 5000USD; the second was relocation to Asmarat; and the third was an apartment in Maspero Triangle after the development project. The uncertainty and lack of faith in the government’s plan led many to choose monetary compensation or relocation to Asmarat. This ended most of the residents’ dream of staying in Maspero after its development, leaving only around 900 families who chose to stay in the neighbourhood. Whether or not the government will give the residents their promised housing units remains to be seen.

Affective states: the unravelling of “the people” and the making of the baltagy (the thug)
In critiquing the elitist bias that dismisses the role of the urban poor in political mobilisations and their aftermaths, I do not wish to render the state invisible. On the contrary, I argue that at the time the urban subaltern were developing new political practices and at the nexus of the emergence of new political subjectivities, the state was actively learning. I am not calling for dismissing the state from our analysis of the revolutionary aftermath, rather looking at the state and its practices through the lens of the urban poor and their experiences and not the other way around. I believe that this would highlight certain state practices and processes that could be otherwise overlooked.

In “Affective States” (2008) Ann Stoler argues that the political and social policies of colonial authorities were embedded in the management of affective states and in the technologies of affective control (2008, 6). According to Stoler, the role of the state is not only, as Gramsci suggested, to “educate consent” but also to create the needed affective dispositions for that consent and to cut the affective attachments that would hinder it. “Statecraft was not opposed to the affective, but about its mastery” (2008, 9-10). Colonial powers knew the importance of designing affective regimes to sustain their rule. I argue that the post-colonial nation-state in Egypt was built on the legacy of colonial rule and utilised the accumulation of “affective knowledge” to continue the traditions of fashioning affective dispositions for political control. Moreover, it is not surprising that many of the affective registers that the Egyptian state has been utilising often to “educate consent” for certain policies such as fear of the Islamists, are older than the nation-state itself and we can find their roots in the times of British colonialism.

Following the work of Ann Stoler, Laszczkowski and Reeves (2017, 2-3) argue for the important role that affect and emotions play in transforming the state and producing political imaginaries and subjectivities. The affective charge of the state is implicated in both the everyday lives of its citizens as well as in exceptional encounters that could alter the affective regimes and registers that inform and even consolidate state power. The Egyptian revolution presented a crisis of legitimacy for the state and a moment that challenged a colonial legacy of affective modes of governance. It was an opportunity to renegotiate feelings of and about the state and subvert an affective regime that precedes the postcolonial nation state built on cultivating and manipulating certain fears for purposes of
affective control. In particular, the affective narrative of the unruly, uncivilised and even ungovernable urban masses that manifested itself in the “Baltagy” discourse. However, the state swiftly reinforced the “Baltagy” narrative to accomplish three main endeavours. First, to disrupt any and all forms of “affective solidarity” (Juris 2008) that may have developed, and often celebrated, during the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution especially among members of the middle classes and the urban subaltern. Second, to create the affective dispositions needed to justify mass violence against protesters especially the urban poor. Third, to re-enact the state as a strong unquestioned power that does not tolerate mass protests nor open opposition, thus, erasing any sustained affective charge from the revolutionary moment. I claim that the role of the Baltagy is key in understanding the relationship between the subaltern poor, the state and the disruptions of the revolution. The narratives around “thuggery” were used to vilify the urban poor and undermine their politics. In the below data excerpt, one of the research participants tells me how the narrative of thuggery was used to justify forced evictions.

“They [the state] used the media and newspapers, especially Al-Ahram newspaper, to say that we are Baltagya (thugs) to ruin our image and justify the removal of the neighbourhood. We are doctors, professors and teachers. They used the narrative that we are Baltagya. During this time, I tried to counter this idea and explain to the people that this is how they want to depict us. We do not want to appear this way.”

The urban subaltern or popular forces have been at the heart of what constitutes “the people” in the infamous slogan “the people demand the downfall of the regime” (Ismail 2013). During the 18 days, around 100 police stations in popular quarters in Cairo were burned down. Ismail contests official accounts that reported these acts as the work of thugs (Baltagya). However, I disagree with Ismail, I think the question of who burned the police stations during the 18 days could serve as an entry point to problematise the identity of the “Baltagya” rather than simply posit them in opposition with “revolutionaries”. The revolutionary moment blurred the lines between who is a thug and who is a revolutionary. Since all protesters were outlaws, everyone became a “thug”. I argue that this was a moment of subversion and renegotiation of the affective dispositions around the
urban poor. Hemmings (2005) argues that bodies are captured and held by affective structures. However, the revolutionary moment presented an opportunity for the aggressive demarcation of bodies. Specifically, the bodies of the subaltern urban poor. I claim that examining the affective registers linked to the making of the “Baltagy” and the terrorist are essential in understanding the counter-revolution. It sheds a light on the potential of the revolutionary moment and the urgency with which the state had to quickly reinstate the historical narrative of the “Baltagy” as dangerous criminals to justify mass violence, shift blame and speed urban transformation projects. Paul Amar calls this “the baltagy-effect” (2011, 308). A state strategy to demonise protests started before the revolution and feeds into the depiction of “the Arab street” as “crazed mobs of brutal men, vaguely ‘Islamist’, and fiercely irrational” (Amar 2011, 308). Once protests became too dangerous, once strategic alliances and affective ties that emanated from the revolution were severed, what was left from the critical mass of “the people” was the urban subaltern and political Islam. Through the modulation of the needed affects, it was easy for the state to rally the needed domestic and international support to crush those proclaimed terrorists and thugs and mobilise the needed support to solve Cairo’s “informality problem” through massive urban upgrading projects. Hence, the move to Asmarat.

Asmarat: “an open-air prison”

Solving Cairo’s “informality problem” has been one of El Sisi’s continued promises. The Asmarat housing project started in 2016 and was presented as a solution. Asmarat, which is located in the Cairo district of Moqattam, was constructed by Cairo governorate and the Armed Forces Engineering Authority with the aim to house residents of Cairo’s informal settlements. The project is planned to include 20,000 housing units at its completion. It currently houses around 10,000 families from different areas in Cairo among them the Maspero Triangle, Manshiyet Nasser and Duweiq. Inside the housing blocs there are different names for the different sets of buildings that have different colours, each bloc houses the people of a certain area. Duweiq inhabitants, for instance, are housed in green buildings and their area is called Banafseg (Violet) while the buildings of those who came from Boulaq Abu Al-Ila and the Maspero triangle are coloured orange and called
Yasmeen (Jasmine). The families who were relocated from Maspero were given the choice to go to Asmarat and pay 300LE per month, a relatively high rent that is not suited for many who live on low government pensions. The first thing that caught my eye when I walked into Asmarat was the slogan “long live Egypt” that was visible everywhere almost on all the similar housing blocks. “Long live Egypt” is the infamous slogan that President El Sisi used in 2014 in his first elections campaign and is the official name of the city. This is in itself telling of how important this project is to the presidency.

The residents from Maspero Triangle who now live in Asmarat have many grievances. “Many of us regret having chosen to come here”, one of the residents told me. The complaints are many, but I can group them into three main interlinked categories: services, security and unemployment. The lack of services is something felt by almost all residents in Asmarat, especially women. There is no hospital in the city, only a small clinic that is not equipped to provide urgent healthcare in case of emergencies. The kinder gardens are all private and too expensive for most families in the area. Residents who came from Maspero Triangle were used to having almost everything they needed nearby; now they must take more than one bus to reach the nearest market. The shops inside the city do not provide for everything they need. Moreover, whenever the resourceful residents tried to fill this gap and arrange for food carts or vendors who would go to the nearest market to bring commodities over to try to sell them inside the city, they were heavily punished by the municipality. This brings us to the second category: security or the relationship with the state. Asmarat is a project meant to solve informality not just the problem of informal housing; any randomness as state officials call it will not be tolerated. I argue that this signals a shift in state-society relations and the way the urban poor in Cairo have been governed for years. One blatant example is the issue of the shops inside Asmarat. Most of the former residents of Maspero Triangle worked in downtown Cairo and they either lost their jobs when they moved or had to quit because the price of transportation is relatively high compared to their salaries. To solve the growing unemployment problem among young residents of Asmarat, they have been asking about the closed shops in the city and trying to negotiate with the government a way through which they can use some of the shops themselves, which – in their opinion – might solve both the services shortages and unemployment. In an interview with
Mada Masr, Khaled Siddiq, the executive director of the Informal Settlements Development Fund was asked about these shops. His exact answer was: “We’ve delayed the openings of these shop because we’re working on unifying the styles of their facades, so they all look the same and conform to an image of the ideal society. We won’t leave any room for randomness to come back to this area again. Later, these stores will be put up for tender.”

Siddiq’s words are indicative of the state’s approach to solve the informality problem. Asmarat is a housing project aimed at creating an ideal society and reform the people who have been living in informality for years. There will be no tolerance for any other way. Of course, ISDF and the local municipality understand that opening up tenders for the shops means that the residents will probably not be able to enter the competition to buy them. However, that does not seem to be a major concern for them as long as the shops are uniform and project an image of an ideal society. Meanwhile, the residents are prohibited from engaging in any of the informal economic practices they were used to in their old neighbourhoods to fill the services gap such as drive a tuk-tuk to take residents to the nearest bus station or run a full cart to bring food to those who cannot go to the market. A complaint linked to this was how senior citizens and people with special needs have lost the support system on which they depended for years in their old neighbourhoods.

The state’s fight against informality has waged a war against many of the social practices that were central to maintaining the social fabric of the neighbourhood. The municipality has been against any social gatherings of any sort on the streets; in their former neighbourhoods, residents were used to having funerals, weddings, Iftar in Ramadan and similar collective assemblies. This is now prohibited in Asmarat. The lack of control over their immediate environment and the drastic change in relation with the state is more apparent every day to the residents of Asmarat and it is a very disempowering experience – one that makes them feel they are living in an “open-air prison” as many of them have described. This is also apparent in the harsh response of the state to any sign of protest. In 2018, some residents complained about rent values and other contract-related problems and organised protests inside the city and some even withheld their rent payments in objection. The municipality acted swiftly issuing eviction notices to those who did
not want to pay the rent. Asmarat has makeshift gates at the entrance, sometimes a police officer would be there to check resident and ask guests about where they are going and whom they are visiting. At any point, any suspicious gathering on the street would be dispersed or young men could even be arrested and taken to the local police stations. There is a sense among the residents that the state is constantly on their case, watching their every move.

How do local communities organise against collective erasure?

In facing the removal of their neighbourhoods, their way of life as well as material and affective dispossession, local communities have been engaging in formal and alternative modes of resistance. In this section, I demonstrate some of those diverse techniques that depict, in their variation, the layers of oppression they have been dealing with and the complex challenges that have been imposed on local communities in their struggles for survival.

Using art to defend a threatened identity

The Maspero Triangle residents were inspired by the myriad of graffiti campaigns taking place around downtown Cairo that asserted the right to the city and helped spread political messages. Thus, shortly after the revolution, the Maspero youth alliance, together with graffiti artists, activists and the people of Maspero initiated a graffiti campaign writing on the walls of their neighbourhood and inscribing their slogan “yes to development, no to forced evictions”. The use of graffiti has been a way through which the alliance can spread their message in a participatory manner with the people of the neighbourhood. Their powerful slogan shows their clear position for the development of the area and demystifies the notion that they are against the development project. However, they assert what they have repeatedly mentioned to me in several conversations; any development project should be centred around the inhabitants of the neighbourhood and work for the local community not against it. They understand and propagate that they should be at the forefronts of these development project not victimised by them. The use of graffiti is only one of many ways through which we can see the revolution in the
neighbourhood, drawing upon practices that were used in the revolution and appropriating them to serve their cause. In many cases, local communities believe that their struggle is part of the revolutionary struggle and should not be side-lined or seen as the demands of the few (mataled fea’awyax). Interestingly, in Asmarat the people from Maspero continued writing on walls. They are unable to organise graffiti campaigns because the municipality will not allow it, but they still write illegally announcing their presence and trying to claim the walls of their new neighbourhood.

Al Hataba is another neighbourhood in old Cairo that is currently facing the threat of removal. One of the young activists calling for urban rights and against the removal of the neighbourhood used a different form of art to raise awareness about the history of the area and depict the neighbourhood in a different light. Mohamed Khalifa, a young man in his twenties, produced a mahragan (a form of popular music). In his song titled “Hataba is my address” (Al Hataba Anwany) he takes us on a tour through the neighbourhood and introduces some of the residents in the area. He highlights the historicity of the area and lays his claim to the neighbourhood singing that his family has lived there for three generations. He also discusses the diversity of the neighbourhood and mentions that they are not all thugs (baltagyax). Through his song, he highlights the misconceptions of the neighbourhood and how it is depicted as a dangerous place filled with drug addicts, how he is judged by others when he mentions that he comes from Al Hataba. He invites those who judge him to get to know him rather than listen to propaganda about his neighbourhood. He does not romanticise the area but highlights that, like any other neighbourhood, there are good and bad people. He also sings about how he is an easy target for police oppression just because of his address, how is deemed a criminal just because of where he lives. He claims that Al Hataba is a historical neighbourhood (a similar claim was made by Maspero residents) and that the government depicted the area as a slum. Interestingly, he also highlights the coalition between investors and the regime to remove the area and turn it into a tourist site. He shows the different strategies that the government used to marginalise inhabitants and push through with the removal of the neighbourhood.

Such strategies were often highlighted by residents of Maspero triangle during my
fieldwork. First, residents were not allowed to provide any kind of maintenance to their houses. Second, closing their main sources of income through the closure of a doorway to the citadel that was in the neighbourhood as well as closing most services such as schools. Thirdly, announcing the removal of the neighbourhood. He sings about the hope they felt during the revolution but was crushed shortly after when they heard the decision to evict them. At the end of the Mahragan, Khalifa announces, “we are not leaving”, which is a powerful declaration. In this song, Khalifa managed to introduce the neighbourhood, outline his claim to the area, uncover government strategies to get rid of the residents and declare his position against eviction. A powerful technique that reaches people in the neighbourhood and outside and outlines the problem and helps raise awareness of the issue of urban struggle. A creative advocacy tool that is accessible to a wide audience and can be easily disseminated through sharing the video on social media. This is one example of how local communities use and subvert alternative expressions to help spread their message and fight different layers of oppression.

*Picture 1 Picture from a graffiti campaign that the association did in the neighbourhood that says “No to forced immigration, yes to developing the area”*
Using social media to preserve a dispersed community

Khalifa uploaded the above-mentioned Mahragan under the hashtag “no to the removal of Al Hataba”. In the song, he highlights that he is a tech-savvy young man who uses Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to connect with the world. In facing accusations of backwardness, Khalifa asserts in his song that he is part of this global community through his access to social media. Using social media has been crucial to the residents of neighbourhoods facing erasure such as Al Hataba, Al Warraq or Maspero triangle. Most neighbourhood collectives, associations and groups created their own pages or closed Facebook groups to share information about government plans, newspaper articles discussing their neighbourhood, meeting minutes, statements and facilitate the discussion of alternatives and making informed decisions. In the case of Maspero, which has already been removed, social media is helping to create a virtual community since the physical community was erased and to keep in touch with those who went to Asmarat and
know about their struggle. The use of social media was essential for residents to spread the message about what is happening in their areas and to counter mainstream media narratives that praise these great urban development projects and often omit the experiences of the people.

Documenting resistance.

The residents also use these Facebook pages and groups to document their struggle, by uploading videos and photos of the area, their memories in the neighbourhood and to archive their existence in the face of complete erasure. For instance, in Maspero triangle the residents started a photography campaign right before the removal of the neighbourhood asking everyone to upload photos of their streets, favourite areas of the neighbourhood or best memories. This aimed to commemorate the neighbourhood and document their special relationship with it. The result was a collection of all sorts of pictures of what it meant to live in Maspero triangle as they bid farewell to it.

Community organising

The issue of community organising has been crucial in almost all of the urban areas facing removal. In Maspero, as discussed above, the residents knew that this is a collective struggle and collective action is the only way through which they would be heard. They established the Maspero youth alliance in 2008 through which they were able to reach out to journalists and human rights activists, negotiate with the government and raise awareness of the issue among the residents of Maspero. They held community meetings, initiated campaigns, issued statements, engaged in participatory research, organised protests, coordinated lawsuits and met with government officials when they had the opportunity. They aimed at establishing a collective from the people of the neighbourhood to best represent it. They tried to be as inclusive as possible. Nevertheless, they faced many challenges, including political differences and threats from the security forces to some members because of the role they played in the alliance. The most important challenge was that - after campaigning for so long against eviction and after a lot of work in the area - most residents chose compensation or an
apartment in Asmarat instead of staying in Maspero. They understood why the community made these choices; they realised that mistrust in the government’s plan led many to choose other options than what the alliance had for a long time advocated for and they decided to embrace the choices of their community and worked with them to ensure that each can get the alternative they opted for. They facilitated communication with the governorate when it was needed, they resolved community problems that came up during the process of compensation and they did their best to keep their community informed. Thus, the alliance played a central role in ensuring the interests of the people of Maspero were represented.

**Countering the state’s narrative**

A similar initiative happened in Warraq Island. In October 2017, the Warraq Island Family Council was established to fight for the residents’ housing rights and provide a counter-narrative to the one portrayed in mainstream media. Similar to Maspero youth alliance, Warraq Island Family Council has been organising community conferences and protests, issuing statements clarifying their stances, communicating with media to provide their point of view of what has been happening in the island and trying to represent the interests of the local community. They have been also fighting the narrative of thuggery that has been used to vilify them. The Warraq Family Council also tried to be as inclusive as possible asking each of the big families to nominate five people and adding to the council youth leaders to ensure that young people are represented.

These are just two examples of community organising in urban areas facing the threat of removal. Even under a repressive political climate and serious security threats and with limited means, local communities in urban areas around Cairo continue to organise collectively in the struggle for their cause. Local communities understand that these are collective struggles, which means that they need to organise within their own neighbourhood but also reach out beyond their areas. In Maspero triangle, the active members of the Maspero youth alliance managed to create solidarity networks with human rights organisations working on housing rights, urban scholars, researchers and journalists. They also reached out to local communities in other areas who have been facing similar struggles such as Al
Hataba to exchange ideas, strategies and lessons learned. These solidarity networks have been crucial to counter mainstream media narratives, circulate information, and get legal advice and different technical expertise on housing issues to that given by the government.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I try to highlight the political consequence of the expedited urban upgrading projects that is affecting the urban poor in Cairo. I argue that the removal of entire neighbourhoods such as Maspero Triangle would have detrimental effects on local politics and will lead to the further political marginalisation of the urban poor as they lose their political street (Bayat 2009).

I claim that one of the tactics of the regime is to systematically deconstruct the politics of the urban subaltern who played a major role in the revolution (Ismail 2013) through urban reconfiguration as well as new and old methods of affective co-optation and coercion. I argue that the revolution was a disruptive and productive moment to contentious street politics that have been developing over the years in Cairo (Bayat 2009, Ismail 2006). The revolutionary moment may not have led to new political practices per se but certainly served as a political playfield where some political practices developed through the collision of different political worlds on the square. Mainly, I focus on the subversion of the notion of “Baltagy” during the revolution. The role of the Baltagy is key in understanding the relationship between the subaltern poor, the state and the disruptions of the revolution. I argue that the narratives around “thuggery” were used to vilify the urban poor and undermine their politics.

The state has a vision of an ideal society through which it aims to reform the unruly masses. A vision that is currently being implemented through the removal of entire neighbourhoods under the guise of urban upgrading and a different outlook of securitisation. The urban struggle of Maspero Triangle discussed in this paper is only one of many happening currently all-around Cairo. Residents of other areas such as Al Hataba and Warraq are possibly facing a similar fate. In the face of bulldozers, citizens are using new and old ways of local politics to fight for housing rights, against forcible evictions and the dismantling of their neighbourhoods with
their unique social fabrics. Current urban upgrading projects and the move to Asmarat signals a shift in state-society relations that will have drastic consequences on street politics in Cairo. For many of the urban poor, street politics was the only political avenue available. Thus, this will change the map of local politics and will pose a challenge on theorists and researchers to conceptualise the shifting political dynamics in Cairo’s streets.

**References**


Khalil, O. (2018). From Community Participation to Forced Eviction in the Maspero Triangle. [online] TIMEP. Available at: https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/fro


Endnotes

1. The fund, established in 2008, has a board of directors that includes the ministers of housing, planning, local development, finance, electricity and international cooperation, as well as three experts and three representatives from civil society and the business sector, who are selected by the prime minister. The Housing Minister and Prime Minister Mostafa Madbuly is the current head of the fund. The fund has an executive director tasked with conducting the minister’s business and legally representing him.


3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KqAkHmGtFc
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