

Civil Society and the Uncivil State

Land Tenure Reform in Egypt and the Crisis of Rural Livelihoods

Ray Bush

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Acronyms

BLACD	Better Life Association
CAP	Capability Enhancement through Citizen Action
CARE Egypt	Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere, Inc., Egypt
CDA	community development association
CSO	civil society organization
DfID	Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
ERSAP	Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme
GDP	gross domestic product
GoE	Government of Egypt
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
IFI	international financial institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LE	Egyptian pound (1 LE = 0.1623 USD, at time of publication)
MALR	Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation
MISA	Ministry for Insurance and Social Affairs
NGO	non-governmental organization
PBDAC	Principal Bank for Development and Agricultural Credit
PVO	private voluntary organization
SAP	structural adjustment programme
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WUA	water-user association

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

In this paper, Ray Bush examines the impact of recent changes in the relationship between landowners and tenants in Egypt. He does so by looking at Law 96 of 1992, which revoked rights of tenure that had been a hallmark of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's social revolution. In this context, Bush explores the links between economic liberalization, on one hand, and political liberalization, on the other, specifically as they relate to rural Egypt—rural livelihoods, asset redistribution and, especially, land. Bush also considers the declared intentions of the government and donors (the United States Agency for International Development—USAID, and the World Bank, in particular) relating to political liberalization and the role of rural civil society, and sets those intentions against actual outcomes in terms of political representation, participation in local institutions, rule of law, improvement of rural well-being and protection of rural livelihoods.

While the government of Egypt has declared the importance of widening political participation, and donors have stressed the need for an expansion of what they call civil society, concrete evidence of either is lacking. This raises two immediate questions related to Egypt's rural areas that the government is reluctant to address. The first relates to the likely outcome of the state's withdrawal from the provision of agricultural inputs. How have the *fellahin* (peasants) coped with the reduction of government support? The second question is whether civil society organizations (CSOs) have been able to substitute for the state's withdrawal from agricultural provision, and whether this has ushered in a new era for political liberalization and democratization.

Bush claims that recent years have seen political deliberalization. There has been a narrowing of the possibility for political action independent of the state. According to the author, the state continues to determine what constitutes formal political practice—the extent to which a political party can recruit new members, hold meetings and organize democratic opposition to the regime, for example.

This is the political context—referred to as the “uncivil state”—within which the author examines opportunities that have arisen for the *fellahin*, especially those dispossessed since 1997, to mobilize and promote their interests. Bush discusses issues raised by tenants who have lost land, and the consequences for their asset base, level of poverty, social exclusion and their rights to land. He examines the violence that took place in Egypt's countryside, especially after 1997, and assesses the extent to which that might be seen as indicative of protest within the realm of civil society, or as a new and different form of political mobilization. Bush shows that while donors and the government intended the 1992 reform of tenancy to promote improvements in Egypt's land market and, in parallel, enhanced opportunities for rural political expression, this has not taken place. Moreover, market liberalization has generated greater rural poverty and unemployment, and has resulted in greater dependence on family resources for the *fellahin*.

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Résumé

Ray Bush étudie ici les effets des changements survenus récemment dans les relations entre les propriétaires fonciers et leurs fermiers en Egypte. Il le fait à la lumière de la loi N° 96 de 1992, qui abolit les droits d'occupation qui avaient été la marque de la révolution sociale du Président

Gamal Abdel Nasser. Dans ce contexte, il explore les liens entre la libéralisation économique, d'une part, et la libéralisation politique, de l'autre. Il prend pour cas particulier l'Égypte rurale, et se penche sur les moyens d'existence des populations rurales, la redistribution des biens et, plus particulièrement, les terres. Ray Bush prend également en considération les déclarations faites par le gouvernement et les donateurs (l'Agency for International Development des États-Unis—USAID et la Banque mondiale en particulier) à propos de la libéralisation politique et du rôle de la société civile rurale et compare les intentions exprimées aux résultats obtenus (représentation politique, participation aux institutions locales, primauté du droit, amélioration des conditions de vie et protection des moyens d'existence des populations rurales).

Si le gouvernement égyptien a souligné l'importance d'une plus large participation politique et les donateurs la nécessité d'une "société civile" plus développée, rien n'indique dans les faits que l'évolution soit allée dans ce sens. Cela amène immédiatement l'auteur à soulever, à propos des campagnes égyptiennes, deux questions que le gouvernement hésite à se poser. Premièrement, que se passerait-il si l'État se désintéressait de la fourniture des intrants agricoles? Comment les *fellahin* (paysans) ont-ils supporté la diminution des soutiens de l'État? Deuxièmement, les organisations de la société civile (OSC) ont-elles pu remplacer l'État dans ce domaine et en est-il résulté un tournant favorable à la libéralisation politique et à la démocratisation?

Ray Bush estime que l'on assiste depuis quelques années à une délibéralisation politique. La possibilité d'une action politique indépendante de l'État s'est réduite. Selon l'auteur, l'État continue à dicter ce qui constitue la pratique politique officielle—la mesure dans laquelle un parti politique peut recruter de nouveaux membres, tenir des réunions et organiser une opposition démocratique au régime, par exemple.

Tel est le contexte politique—ce qu'il appelle "l'État incivil"—dans lequel l'auteur examine les possibilités qui s'offrent aux *fellahin*, en particulier à ceux qui ont été dépossédés en 1997, de se mobiliser et de défendre leurs intérêts. Il traite des questions soulevées par les fermiers qui ont perdu des terres et des conséquences de cette dépossession sur l'état de leurs biens, leur niveau de pauvreté, leur exclusion sociale et, en général, leurs droits à la terre. Il étudie de près les manifestations de violence qui se sont produites dans les campagnes égyptiennes, en particulier depuis 1997, et évalue dans quelle mesure on pourrait y voir un signe de protestation de la part de la société civile ou une forme nouvelle et différente de mobilisation politique. L'auteur montre que si les donateurs et le gouvernement entendaient, par la réforme d'occupation des sols de 1992, favoriser une amélioration du marché foncier égyptien et, parallèlement, élargir les formes d'expression politique des populations rurales, ils ont manqué leur but. La libéralisation du marché a eu de surcroît pour effet d'étendre la pauvreté et d'aggraver le chômage dans les campagnes et a rendu les *fellahin* plus dépendants des ressources familiales.

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Resumen

En este documento, Ray Bush examina los efectos que han tenido los cambios introducidos recientemente en la relación entre terratenientes y arrendatarios en Egipto. Para ello analiza la Ley 96 de 1992, que revocó los derechos de tenencia de la tierra, que habían sido el sello distintivo de la revolución social del Presidente Gamal Abdel Nasser. En este contexto, Bush explora los vínculos entre la liberalización económica, por una parte, y la liberalización política, por otra, específicamente en lo que atañe al Egipto rural—medios de vida rurales, redistribución de bienes y, en particular, la tierra. También estudia las intenciones declaradas

por el gobierno y los donantes (la Agencia de los Estados Unidos para el Desarrollo Internacional—USAID, y el Banco Mundial, en concreto), relativas a la liberalización política y al papel que desempeña la sociedad civil rural, y compara dichas intenciones con los resultados actuales en términos de representación política, participación en las instituciones locales, estado de derecho, la mejora del bienestar en el ámbito rural y protección de los medios de vida rurales.

Aunque el gobierno de Egipto ha declarado la importancia que reviste ampliar la participación política, y aunque los donantes han puesto de relieve la necesidad de expandir lo que ellos denominan “sociedad civil”, faltan pruebas concretas de ambos hechos. Esto plantea dos cuestiones apremiantes relacionadas con las zonas rurales de Egipto que el gobierno se muestra reacio a abordar. La primera se refiere a las consecuencias que probablemente suponga el cese del apoyo estatal a la agricultura. ¿Cómo han enfrentado los *fellahin* (campesinos) la reducción del apoyo estatal? La segunda cuestión es si las organizaciones de la sociedad civil (OSC) han hallado el modo de sustituir esta falta de apoyo, y si esta situación ha marcado el comienzo de una nueva era para la liberalización política y la democratización.

Bush sostiene que en los últimos años se ha producido una desliberalización política. Se han reducido las probabilidades de una acción política independiente del Estado. Según el autor, el Estado sigue determinando lo que constituyen las prácticas políticas formales—por ejemplo, el grado en que un partido político puede contratar a nuevos miembros, celebrar reuniones y organizar la oposición democrática al régimen.

Éste es el contexto político—al que se refiere como “estado incivil”—en el que el autor examina las oportunidades que han tenido los *fellahin*, en particular los despojados de sus tierras desde 1997, de movilizarse y promover sus intereses. Bush aborda las cuestiones planteadas por los arrendatarios que han perdido tierras, y las consecuencias para sus bienes, nivel de pobreza, exclusión social y mayores derechos de tenencia de la tierra. Analiza la violencia que tuvo lugar en las zonas rurales de Egipto, particularmente después de 1997, y evalúa el grado en que esto puede considerarse una señal de protesta en el marco de la sociedad civil, o una forma de movilización política nueva y diferente. El autor muestra que, si bien los donantes y el gobierno pretendieron que la reforma de la tenencia de la tierra de 1992 promoviera mejoras en el mercado de la tierra de Egipto y aumentara al mismo tiempo las oportunidades de expresión política en el entorno rural, la realidad ha sido muy distinta. Además, la liberalización del mercado ha generado más desempleo y más pobreza en el ámbito rural, y ha redundado en mayor dependencia de los recursos familiares para los *fellahin*.

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Introduction

This paper examines the impact of recent changes in the relationship between landowners and tenants in Egypt by looking at Law 96 of 1992, which revoked rights of tenure for tenants, to see whether the proposed shift toward market-based formulas for tenancy have improved opportunities for rural civil society. Put simply, has there been any link between economic liberalization on the one hand and political liberalization on the other, specifically as it relates to rural Egypt? Have the possibilities for political expression by farmers and rural dwellers, through local organizations and associations, expanded as the opportunities for entry into a land market are also supposed to also have increased?

These questions raise issues that are at the heart of rural livelihoods, asset redistribution and especially land. This paper examines the declared intentions on political liberalization and expansion of rural civil society of the Government of Egypt (GoE) and donors, notably the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank. Those intentions will be set against actual recent outcomes for political representation, participation in local institutions and the rule of law, and the improvement of rural well-being and protection of rural livelihoods. The approach is rooted in political economy. The paper examines the relationship between the state and economy in Egypt, identifies the actors who shape that relationship, and looks at the impact of structural adjustment on rural Egypt's institutions.

This is not always easy work in the Egyptian context. Egypt's ruling elite views the control of access to information and the debate of policy issues as central to its maintenance of political and economic power. Egypt has at different times been characterized as a democracy of newspapers, as the centre of Middle Eastern media and cultural liberalism: that view has always been questionable, and especially so at the start of the twenty-first century.¹

While there have been many GoE announcements of the importance of widening political participation, and donors have stressed the need for an expansion of what they call "civil society", neither has taken place. This failure raises two immediate questions related to Egypt's rural areas that the GoE is reluctant to address. The first of these is what will be the likely outcome of the state's withdrawal from the provision of agricultural inputs and marketing for the *fellahin's*, or peasants', ability to continue agricultural production? How have the *fellahin* managed to cope with the reduction of GoE support with agricultural services as rural poverty increases? Second, has there been an increase in the number and variety of civil society organizations (CSOs) to substitute for state withdrawal from agricultural provision, and has this ushered in a new era for political liberalization and democratization?

This paper demonstrates that there has been, in recent years, a political deliberalization (Kienle 2001). There has been a narrowing of the possibility for political action independent of the state. This narrowing authoritarianism challenges the view that a civil society exists as anything other than as a slogan used by the GoE to curry favour from the donor community. This should not be surprising for any keen observer of Egypt's political economy. While there was a degree of political reform following the death of President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, with the ending of the single-party system by Anwar Sadat's in 1977, Egyptian politics has been unable to break free from the fact that the main political parties were created by the state. Any new party still has to be approved by a committee on the formation of political parties. The state continues to determine what constitutes formal political practice—the extent to which a political party can politicize, organize and recruit new members as well as hold meetings and organize democratic opposition to the regime—and even the number of representatives that will be tolerated in the People's Assembly.

¹ Extensive media censorship seems at odds with President Mubarak's repeated observation that he is concerned about protecting the "freedom of the press", although these comments are usually hedged by his view that "such freedom is governed by national conscience". See *Cairo Press Review*, 17 July 2001, page 15.

One of the failures of Nasser's revolution was its dependency upon limited and restricted political participation from the social and class forces it had used to fight the injustice of the *ancien régime*. Yet the social contract that was imposed to protect the revolution coerced the *fellahin* and working class to accept political quietude for limited land reform, and improved living and working conditions. That compact reduced political participation during the Nasser years, but also inhibited future reform that sought to widen the scope for decision making and formulation of policy beyond the armed forces and crony political and economic elite. As Shahenda Maqlad has noted, reflecting on her life as a rural activist and leftist Tagammu militant:²

One of the big mistakes of the July 1952 revolution was that it didn't allow autonomous populist organizations. When Sadat took away peasants' gains and started his campaign against everything Nasser stood for, resistance was weak and unorganized (*Cairo Times*, 4–10 May 2000:20).

President Hosni Mubarak's regime (1981–present) has failed to move away from the authoritarian corporatism and nationalist populism that characterized the previous regimes. He has concentrated efforts to sustain his political power that was, at the time of Sadat's assassination, without much legitimacy. The 1960s and 1970s were marked by severe limitations on political participation as the regimes tried to quell unrest with moderate improvements to service provision. The limited improvement to health and education was only possible while the regime could finance it. However, Egypt's economic crisis intensified as its ability to generate growth away from its traditional rentier sectors like revenue from the Suez canal, migrant labour remittances and oil with a sustainable agriculture and manufacturing base drove it into deeper recession and fiscal crisis.³ The record of the 1980s and 1990s has been largely of the Egyptian regime equipping itself with the ability to continue to manage dissent while also promoting a somewhat garbled and partial message of economic reform, market liberalization and financial austerity, for farmers and workers.

This paper examines opportunities that have arisen for the *fellahin*, especially tenants and those dispossessed since 1997, to mobilize and promote their interests within the context of Egypt's "uncivil" state—a state that often rides roughshod over human and civil rights without due process of law. I will discuss issues raised by several tenants who lost land after 1997 and the consequences of that land loss for their asset base, their level of poverty, the social exclusion that they have endured and the assault on their rights to land. I will examine the level of violence that took place in Egypt's countryside, especially after 1997, and assess the extent to which that might be seen as indicative of protest within the realm of civil society, or as a new and different form of political mobilization. It will become clear that while the declared rationale for donors and the GoE at different times has been that the 1992 reform of tenancy was intended to promote improvements in Egypt's land market with the parallel development of improved opportunities for rural political expression, this has certainly not taken place. I will not focus on issues of a land market, which has been looked at elsewhere (Bush 2002). Instead, I will highlight the fact that civil society groups have not emerged as a result of market reform. Egypt's history of the last decade has been one of deliberalization. Where people have spoken out locally or have organized against impoverishment as a result of market liberalization, they have tended to do so around family and kinship structures. Market liberalization has generated greater rural poverty and unemployment that has been partly managed by the *fellahin* in terms of a greater dependence upon family resources. Yet this has also become jeopardized as economic hardship has intensified, and there is little sense that it will diminish.

² Shahenda Maqlad is also the widow of Salah Hussein, a peasant activist who was murdered by killers hired by a powerful landowning family called Fiqqi in the village of Kamsheesh in the governorate of Minoufiya on 30 April 1966. The murder was prompted by activists insisting that the wealthy Fiqqi family comply with Nasserist land legislation. The Tagammu party or National Progressive Unionist Party has its roots in the Arab Socialist Union and at different times has defended its Nasserist origins.

³ Frischak and Atiyas 1996; Waterbury 1983; Richards and Waterbury 1990.

Improving opportunities for civil society representation has never been on the agenda of Egypt's policy makers. It has been, at different times, part of the pretence of political liberalization that commentators have assumed will *ipso facto* emerge alongside market reform, but the GoE has no intention, or need, to liberalize politically. And even if it did, it certainly would not focus on rural political empowerment which might jeopardize the wealth and status of landed interests.

I will begin with a brief review of whether the concept of civil society is an appropriate one to use and whether it has any usefulness in understanding rural Egypt. I will also trace the recent process of deliberalization. I will then provide the context for examining agriculture and rural livelihoods by looking at what the characterization of Egypt's persistent agricultural crisis has been. It will then be possible to look at the debate about tenure and markets and the impact recent government policy has had on rural livelihoods and assets. There has been a significant continuity in the debates about Egypt's countryside and the political role of the *fellahin* within it. However, there has been no notion that rural organizations that might challenge authority would be important for farmers' self-esteem and confidence, and that support for a political process might empower rather than enervate rural producers and possibly enhance regime legitimacy.

Deliberalization and Politics in Egypt: Whither Civil Society?

The idea that a vibrant civil society is necessary to keep rulers and politicians in check, and to promote democratic transition and consolidation, is prevalent throughout the donor community and is part of the rhetoric of most developing country governments (Keane 1988; Clark 1991). Political conditionality has been written into most aid and donor relations with developing countries. The need for civil society has been taken for granted and its virtues extolled by, *inter alia*, the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID).⁴ Egypt is no exception to this, although what is meant by civil society at a time of deliberalization and an authoritarian regime is unclear (Kandil 1994; Ibrahim 1995).

Civil society

Since the mid-1980s, the term civil society has been "dusted off and deodorized to suit a variety of ideological, intellectual and practical needs" (White 1996:178; see also Keane 1988). In its broadest definition, civil society refers to *public space* independent of the state where many different forms of associational life exist. Additionally, it has been used to refer to all activity outside the state, whether spontaneous or organized. It was the protest movements that emerged to help transform the political regimes of Eastern Europe in the 1980s that many Western commentators saw as capturing the vibrancy of civil society. In that context and since then, the notion of civil society was very much linked with "opposition" to the state (Geremek 1996). There is another view of civil society: a "catchall" to refer to associations between firms, families and the state, especially to refer to the presence of voluntary organizations. These two views of civil society, the more theoretical and analytical category defining "political space" between the state and private life, and the more empirical view referring to all public activity not directly sanctioned by the state, has left a lot of room for confusion.

The difficulty of establishing a clear definition of civil society and avoiding its use to include every activity beyond the state, as in some sense in opposition to it, has often rendered the term too inclusive. If we accept, moreover, the term to include the association between people beyond the home and the state, we need to examine what it is that the organization actually does to determine whether it can be called "civil" or not. That continues to be the case even though civil society is used by policy makers and politicians to imply an arena outside

⁴ DfID 2000; USAID 2000; World Bank 2000a.

government or state control. In the Egyptian context I will indicate farmers' adoption of a range of strategies to cope with economic liberalization. These have involved aspects of using formal protest through existing state-orchestrated avenues as well as elements of what Bayat has called "quiet encroachment" (1997, 1998, 2002). But they have most obviously been characterized by farmer adoption of more usual coping strategies to reduce economic stress, and they have failed to impact positively on the creation of rural civil society.

The focus for most commentators of civil society is to argue that associations therein tend to take an organized form with a routinized character (Steward 1997, citing Hadenius and Uggla 1996). Yet this view of civil society does not adequately capture the forms of protest and opposition that have arisen in Egypt since 1990. Indeed, such a view of civil society does not capture the reality of civil society in Western liberal democratic states either. This is because of the difficulty of knowing what to include in the list of "non-state" actors, or those that operate outside the sphere of the state. For in many social formations it is clear that civic institutions like academic unions, public sector interest groups and those citizens who derive core income from the state are firmly embedded in the state system itself (Bangura 1999:1). This raises issues related to the boundaries of civil society when discussing associational groups. Are all groups and associations, irrespective of membership, aims and objectives, to be included as part of civil society? If civil society is to be linked with political liberalization, do all groups within it contribute to that process or is it more appropriate to discriminate in the assessment of the associations contributing to civil society? Might we want, for instance, to look not only at the aims and objectives of different groups, the types of recruitment mechanisms and social base that they have, but also at the precise relationship they may have with the state?

There is a lot of theoretical slippage when dealing with debates of contemporary civil society. This relates in part to the fact that it was seen in political theory as part of the organic growth with European capitalist development in its early formulation. In its subsequent use to chart a "proper" course for political democracy in developing countries, it has failed adequately to locate the specificity of the term in its historical genesis within continental Europe and has not recognized the difficulties of structurally embedding it in non-Western society. This is not to minimize or fail to see the significance of civil society in the global South. It is instead to understand the possible implications for its late arrival in political discourse and the way in which it has rather confusingly been bandied about, viewed as a liberating force in authoritarian regimes and linked closely with donors and political conditionality. I want to now look a little closer at a number of general limitations to the usefulness of the term, civil society. I want to look at the way in which it has automatically been linked with democratization and why its link to the importance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can misleadingly imply *ipso facto* that a process of democratization is under way simply because a "civil society" can be discerned.

The presence of civil society and organizations such as NGOs have been hailed as the necessary ingredients for promoting and consolidating democracy, empowering people in their struggles against states, and increasing political participation. The argument of many commentators in the 1980s and 1990s was that the pressure to liberalize economies by promoting market reform should be accompanied by political liberalization promoting a plurality of associational groups to ensure greater accountability of the state. While international agencies at the heart of economic liberalization promoted the need for states to reform politically to advance associational life, it has also been the case that political reforms have been seen to necessarily follow market reform. They must follow, rather than predate economic liberalization, to avoid a Russian-style reform fiasco. Second, the political reforms on the agendas of international financial institutions (IFIs) are not envisaged to empower organizations that might challenge the "sanctity" of property rights.

The difficulties with using the term civil society have led Chris Allen to question its use and its simplistic linkage with democratization. He has argued that

the concept of civil society is difficult to pin down empirically, and the theoretical arguments with which it is involved are so closely associated with neo-liberal ideological campaigning, as to cast doubt on the value of the concept overall (Allen 1997:330).

Allen is unhappy with the term because it has carried with it the ideological assertions of its neoliberal origins. First, the preoccupation with associational life asserts that civil society is the source for liberal democratic values, namely openness, transparency, accountability and the rule of law. Second, civil society is seen as the motor for democracy—that is, a liberal democratic version. And third, civil society is posed in opposition to the state. Crucially, a flourishing civil society requires a non-interventionist state—one that furthers the interests of market-oriented individual freedoms (Allen 1997:335).

What has followed for Allen and others (Fowler 1991; Powell and Seddon 1997) has been a development agenda since the early 1980s that has made donor funds conditional with the presence of, or policies to facilitate, a strong civil society in recipient countries. Civil society, made up invariably of a plurality of NGOs, is seen by donors as an opponent of inefficient, corrupt and rent-seeking states. It is here that donors and the debates about civil society have been misleading. In arguing for universal support—some might argue “knee-jerk” support—for NGOs in their opposition to the state, donors have operated with a very naive idea of what NGOs are and the role they might play in a proposed democratization process. As Robert Cox has suggested:

In a ‘bottom-up’ sense, civil society is the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalisation of the world economy can mount their protests and seek alternatives. ... In a ‘top-down’ sense, however, states and corporate interests influence the development of this current version of civil society towards making it an agency for stabilising the social and political status quo (1999:10–11).

While there is no doubt that donors have been careful to channel funds to NGOs that are broadly in agreement with donor policies for development, economic liberalization and political reform that do not challenge the interests of foreign capital, it is also the case that there are many different types of NGOs with different agendas. NGOs, for example, might complement the state by providing social services. They might oppose the state by trying to generate local opposition to aspects of state policy, and they might try to reform the state from within by working with the government (Marcussen 1996:418). And some NGOs are undemocratic in their internal organization and in their ultimate aims and objectives. That has certainly been the accusation made against many Islamist groups in Egypt that have articulated the interests of militant armed groups, promoted exclusion of women and would probably limit the scope for non-Islamic groups and political opposition more generally, if they came into power. In other words, there is no necessary relationship of NGO opposition to the state. The NGO sector, as might be expected, is subject to internal divisions, in relation to what the aims and objectives of NGOs might be and what position they might adopt, or be encouraged to adopt *vis-à-vis* the state. It is more likely that some business NGOs, although clearly not all in the Egyptian case, will be more sympathetic to the state than, say a human rights organization. And of course we might note here too that while NGOs are divided horizontally, they are also divided vertically, internally, in terms of their class membership, organization, recruitment and activist base.

It is perhaps more fruitful in understanding civil society to take the focus away from a preoccupation with NGOs and associational activity per se and instead to use the term to describe the *processes* by which states configure relations of consent and coercion. Gramsci's concern in the spiralling fascist Italy of the 1930s was to grapple with a topsy-turvy world where life outside or beyond the state at different times and often in quick succession became enmeshed with the state, separate from it or subordinate to it (Gramsci 1976; Showstack

Sassoon 1978).⁵ For Gramsci, the essential way in which dominant classes maintained authority was to present themselves as legitimate rulers. This was done, most of the time, by convincing subordinate classes of the hegemonic dominance and legitimacy of governing class actions. The constant creation and re-creation of hegemony – rule by consent, but when necessary by force – was, for Gramsci, the crucial factor characterizing the exercise of political power in the interests of the dominant economic classes. According to Gramsci, civil society was only meaningful as a political concept or political reality if it was part of a relationship with the state. Thus while contemporary donors and mainstream academic commentators have tended to talk about civil society in opposition to the state or as a substitute for it, Gramsci believed that civil society could not exist without the state.

This leads us to what Marcussen has identified as a paradox. To cite Naomi Chazan reporting on patterns of state-society incorporation and disengagement in Africa, “strengthening civil society requires as a necessary indispensable condition the strengthening of the state: the state and civil society stand or fall together” (cited in Marcussen 1996:421). It is thus mistaken to counterpose civil society to the state. This dichotomous view is guided by the ideological premise that states are necessarily bad and civil society, namely NGOs, are good. While this neoliberal concern was founded on the importance of securing individual rights, it has been used, since the 1980s, in an ideological battle by donors against states perceived as corrupt and inefficient. The policy formula that resulted from this was to downsize state activity and improve opportunities for individuals to organize collectively in civil society. While there is a need for state reform in the South, by, for example, opening up the arena of decision making, improving transparency and opportunities for political expression, and promoting and upholding the rule of law, donors have usually insisted on a crude formulation that has seen the state as a homogenous inefficient unit in contrast with the need to empower individuals through NGOs or the market (Stewart 1997:12). This view has many shortcomings, but there are two that are interrelated. The first is that if a vibrant civil society is to exist, it requires a strong state; and the second is that the existence of NGOs will not singlehandedly create democracy.

A strong civil society, composed of competing associational groups of different sizes with different foci, needs a strong state to help facilitate the arenas in which civil society can operate. States provide rules for participation and opportunities to express dissent. In short, states deliver the different political, social, economic and cultural processes whereby hegemonic classes remain dominant. States provide the framework, therefore, and are also subject to contradictions and oppositional forces that emerge as a result of the myriad conflicts that states can never fully contain. There is also another contradiction. Strong states are required for strong civil societies, but also jeopardize the independence of NGOs. For example, some organizations have tried to pursue democratic reforms, but this was made difficult by the fact that their leaders were part of the government (Allen 1997:336). And it is common in Egypt for the relationship between the state and civil society to be harnessed around NGOs and “partnerships” between government and associations. Talking more broadly, Allen has noted that

there is no single pattern of relationships between regimes and elements of civil society. Not only are there some organisations close to authoritarian governments, but there is a general sense in which civil society as associational life depends on the state, while its growth may depend on material support from government (Allen 1997:336).

⁵ This formulation of “processes” is not meant to relegate any concrete “spatial location” for civil society. Gramsci was clear, using the evocative language of trenches, ditches and fortifications around the state, that consent was manufactured defusing any raw class relations of exploitation within and beyond the institutions of the state. Civil society thus becomes among other things the arena(s) in which culture, structures of power and creation of social order are reproduced and any possible class-based identity is undermined. We will see below how on the one hand the development of a more robust structure for community development associations (CDAs) is a tremendous achievement to help promote greater democratization and openness for rural decision making. Yet CDAs also potentially serve to continue to fragment class-based opposition to government-imposed actions.

Instead of donors therefore seeking to undermine an often already fragmented state, they might more usefully seek to enhance state capacity. Unfortunately, where this has been adopted, it has tended to promote management reforms, including privatization that has lessened rather than promoted state effectiveness and, ironically, enabled “spoils politics” to continue (Bangura 1999:5). In so doing, donors prioritize the political liberalization of the state that is intended to directly assist economic liberalization and pressures for globalization. Because of the Egyptian state’s still rentier character, the GoE remains insulated from the pressures of local political forces. This has been aided by a corrupt electoral process, severe limitations on political organizations and censored media. While donors have been fixated with encouraging the GoE to withdraw from economic activity, to shed its “socialist” inheritance, they have effectively promoted a wish list for NGOs to replace government services. Yet that fails to understand that the state’s withdrawal cannot be adequately picked up by the new donor-funded entrants—even if that was the policy intent—and such intervention would be divisive and would fragment opposition political forces. In other words, while it is useful to view the relationship between the state and NGOs as one of a struggle for ideas, policy and active legitimacy, it would be wrong to invest in NGOs as the force for democratization, simply because they may emanate from beyond the state.

Deliberalization in Egypt

Civil society debate is seldom concerned with rural civil society. Whether donor- or government-led, debate is generally focused to include urban society, and social and political forces, namely the working class and other class or associational forces. Egypt is no exception to this, except for the rhetorical views expressed about Sharouk to which I will refer later.

It is difficult to estimate accurately the number of NGOs in Egypt. A 1998 World Bank study suggests there were 28,000, while the Ministry for Insurance and Social Affairs (MISA), which was responsible for registering NGOs (prior to 2000 this was the Ministry for Social Affairs) indicates that there were 14,600. MISA has the responsibility to effectively regulate NGOs under Law 32 of 1964.⁶ While that law was revised in 2000 it was deemed unconstitutional, and a new law to replace Law 32 was redrafted in 2001 to avoid the embarrassment of MISA being unable to intensify the legal policing and marshalling of NGOs. In any case that policing role was effectively managed by internal security, and apparently the previous Minister of Social Affairs was removed partly because she was unable to counter external attempts to intervene in the workings of her ministry. Among other things, the legal restraints on NGOs ensure that no foreign funding finds its way to the organizations unless it has been channelled through and agreed with MISA. The registration of NGOs characterizes them as welfare or development agencies, the latter more commonly known as community development associations (CDAs).

Welfare organizations, or *gamiyat reiaia*, are required to focus on a specific activity, namely delivery of health services, welfare or literacy. CDAs may have a range of activities as long as they are approved by MISA and based in a single location. This classification is restrictive, fails to capture the complexity of different NGO activities, and hides many different political and religious activities (Mahfouz 2001).

While on the surface the numbers of NGOs may indicate a certain vibrancy in Egypt’s civil society, the measures of state control and the limitations imposed on NGOs constrain effective independent action that might offer the pretence of autonomous public activity outside of a state intent on control. The level of control by the Egyptian state of NGOs may not be total—even the most repressive of regimes is unable to stifle all opposition—but the sleight of hand between the GoE pronouncements for liberalization, and the actual *de*-liberalization that has been the hallmark of the 1990s, is very evident.

⁶ Law 32 of 1964 governed the approval and regulation of NGOs and included, among other things, government representation on the boards of NGOs.

USAID notes that less than one third of MISA's figure of 14,600 Egyptian NGOs work in the countryside and only about 3,000 actively play a part in "developing and representing their communities" (USAID 2001:1). This is despite the fact that 50 per cent of Egypt's population is rural. And for USAID, the importance of NGOs for rural governance is significant. Before Egypt's structural adjustment programme (SAP) in 1991, the GoE controlled agricultural input and output markets, and the major vehicle for driving agricultural growth were the co-operatives. These were located throughout the country and in every village. Nasser's vision had been that they would provide part of the social contract with the *fellahin*, substituting the power of merchants and feudal landlords.

There were effectively two kinds of co-operatives. The multipurpose co-operatives handled issues of credit, agrarian reform and land reclamation. They provided production and marketing services to membership that was compulsory where individuals had benefited from Nasser's agricultural reform. But, more generally, membership was not voluntary as the co-operative was the sole vehicle for access to farming inputs. The second type of co-operative specialized in areas like livestock, poultry and agricultural machinery.

In 1998 there were 6,604 agricultural co-operatives, including 776 agrarian reform co-operatives and 520 land reclamation co-operatives. About 67 per cent were multipurpose co-operatives and 33 per cent were specialized. Table 1 indicates the number of agricultural co-operatives and their main activities.

Table 1: Number of agricultural co-operatives in Egypt, 1998

Type and level	Multipurpose	Specialized	Total
Credit co-ops			
Local	4,263	732	4,995
Joint	133	—	133
Central	22	70	92
General	1	11	12
Subtotal	4,419	813	5,232
Agrarian reform			
Local	—	687	687
Joint	—	70	70
Central	—	18	18
General	—	1	1
Subtotal	0	776	776
Land reclamation			
Local	—	561	561
Joint	—	21	21
Central	—	13	13
General	—	1	1
Subtotal	0	596	596
Total	4,419	2,185	6,604

Source: USAID and Agricultural Policy and Reform Program (1999).⁷

The evidence from table 1 is misleading. It suggests a vibrant co-operative structure, yet the co-operatives have, in fact, collapsed following the implementation of economic reform. Their demise has led to much unrest among poor landowners and tenants who were previously dependent upon subsidized inputs and guaranteed marketing structures and have been

⁷ The figures for this table conflict with USAID Policy Brief No. 18, September 1999, where a similar table is reproduced.

deprived of subsidized inputs and controlled markets. While there had been widespread dissatisfaction with the old co-operative system, it was little compared to the villagers' unease with the new control by merchants and large landowners that emerged with market liberalization. The prices of inputs fixed by these groups are now much higher compared to the old system and control markets in less flexible ways than the old co-operatives did.

There is a clear tension between the erosion of old rural structures and institutions for the maintenance of agricultural productivity and the rhetoric that market reform will empower the rural individual to make decisions that will enhance agricultural productivity. On the one hand, the rhetoric of both USAID and GoE has repeatedly paid lip service to rural governance issues and political liberalization alongside economic reform. On the other hand, there has been the dissolution of Nasserite agricultural institutions (albeit many of these had served to depoliticize farmers), the erosion of the legal rights of tenants and increases in costs of production that have led to higher levels of rural poverty and unemployment (USAID 2000, 2001; Fergany 2002).

USAID has noted, for instance that there is an important role for NGOs in developing Egyptian society. They are keen to promote "Participatory, accountable governance and a strong non-governmental organization...community" because they are "also important for supporting economic growth" (USAID 2000:1). Nevertheless, USAID does recognize that

most Egyptian PVOs [private voluntary organizations]/NGOs are not meeting the needs of their communities due to lack of autonomy, institutional capacity, and resources. ... Overall, few PVOs/NGOs in Egypt are effectively engaged in making contributions to Egypt's development (USAID 2001:1).

There are two reasons why USAID is unlikely to see any improvement in the role that NGOs might have in developing Egypt's political economy, including its organization of governance. The first is that too much is invested in the idea that NGOs will transform Egypt's political structures. This was raised earlier in relation to donor optimism regarding the importance of NGOs in struggles for development. There is little point in promoting NGOs as a vehicle for democratic governance (meant here to go beyond formal democratic practices of regular free and fair elections). They seem unable, without other political and social pressures, to encompass issues like the possibility for agenda setting, popular mobilization and citizenship with social and economic rights defensible in an independent judiciary. In other words, while NGOs may be important as conduits for expressing particular interests, they will not add much to the processes of democratization unless and until institutional reform recognizing the right of democratic participation and expression is actively promoted. And this also needs to be promoted by non-NGO forces. There does need to be an arena in which citizens can dissent without fear of reprisal, torture or ridicule. And this broader and deeper view of democracy extends to a deeper view of human rights, which can only be effective if people's obligations are acknowledged by everyone in society, and political institutions effectively deliver the normative system to recognize and respond to attacks on people's rights (Beetham 2000). This is far from being achieved in Egypt.

This leads to the second reason why it is inappropriate to invest in the idea that civil society promotion through NGOs in Egypt is a vehicle for democratization. The GoE in the 1990s has promoted a strategy of deliberalization. This theme has been dealt with extensively by Kienle (2001). He has detailed the processes whereby the GoE has restricted positive liberties in the central institutions of the state by, among other things, restricting participation in government, political parties and in the "election" of the president in a referendum where he has been unopposed for four terms. Kienle has also examined the ways in which the GoE has restricted participation in municipal and local government arenas. What Kienle has euphemistically called "streamlining the state apparatus" included preventing participation from below in elections for *umdas* (village headmen) and deans of university faculties. During Mubarak's presidency these officeholders have become state appointments rather than electoral positions (Kienle 2001:164).

There are many reasons for Egypt's deliberalization and among these, the idea of a conflict between the regime and radical Islamic groups has been central. So too has the impact of economic reform that has generated greater inequality and the threat of greater political dissent. Kienle has documented the legal restrictions imposed on the Egyptian press and the ways in which the state sought to restrict both personal liberties and collective freedoms (Kienle 2000: 89-115).

The evidence of deliberalization is substantial. It was much debated in Egypt during the referendum campaign that confirmed Mubarak for an unprecedented fourth term on 26 September 1999. The state-controlled media pulled out all the stops in the referendum campaign. Many street banners and news headlines read, "God gave three gifts to Egypt; the pyramids, the Nile and Mubarak". Mubarak himself announced a new dawn for the country after gaining a declared 93.79 per cent of the vote. The president called for greater political participation to accompany economic liberalization. Yet in the cabinet "reshuffle", he retained 19 of the old guard, and the ageing technocrat Atif Abeid was named prime minister. The 13 new appointments, moreover, were not popular and it became clear, especially after the 2000 parliamentary general election, that the government of Atif Abeid was the most criticized for many decades (*Cairo Times*, 19-25 July 2001).

There has been a discrepancy between the statements of politicians and the actual policies to initiate political liberalization. The GoE's evasion of crucial political issues and forgoing an opportunity to develop its own legitimacy was also at odds with the unprecedented and short-lived agreement between Egypt's four main political parties (excluding the ruling party). The leftist Tagammu, Waft, the Islamist labour party and the Nasserites, together with almost 200 prominent political figures, initiated a petition to the GoE in September 1999. It called for the lifting of emergency legislation, which had been virtually uninterrupted since Sadat's assassination in 1981. The petition also called for the release of political prisoners; guaranteed free and fair elections; full freedom to form political parties; and independence for the country's trade unions and syndicates.

Taken together, the petition effectively called for a parliamentary republic that was clearly not on the agenda of a government that continued to benefit from spoils politics. It was a short-lived political moment when there was agreement among groups that normally fail to find any common ground. Since there was no social movement able to translate slogans from a petition into political mobilization around a programme for reform, the GoE was not alarmed.

From Crisis to Crisis: Agricultural Neglect to Economic Reform

There have been several major themes of continuity and discontinuity in the history of land and agriculture in Egypt. The first of these is the depoliticization of Egypt's farmers by successive regimes—the felt need to reduce opportunities for farmers to organize independently of the state—and the second is the politicization of land. This politicization was first promoted by Nasser as a vehicle to marginalize feudal royalist landowners, who were opposed to the 1952 revolution, in his attempt to redraw rural political boundaries, to secure legal land rights for small farmers, and to stabilize prices and security of tenure. However, the politicization of land continued after Nasser's death, in the struggle for de-Nasserization, to reverse the revolutionary changes of land tenure and security that Nasser had put in place and to replace them with increased strength of the social and economic forces of the *ancien régime*. This was first promoted by Anwar Sadat and was continued by Hosni Mubarak. It has taken the form of market liberalization in agriculture pushed by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture Youssef Wali and culminated in Law 96 of 1992. That law revoked rights of tenure for tenants that had been a hallmark of Nasser's social revolution.

Egypt's land reform in 1952 was the first large-scale reform in the Middle East.⁸ Nasser retained the sanctity of private property, and individual family farms remained the centrepiece for rural development. The land reforms in 1952 and 1961 redistributed about one seventh of the country's cultivable land from large landowners to middle peasants and landless.

Prior to 1952, about 0.1 per cent of total landowners owned 20 per cent of the cultivated land. One hundred and ninety-nine out of a total of about 2,000 large landowners owned 7.3 per cent of the agricultural land. Many of these were owners or relatives of those who had received land from Mohammed Ali Pasha during the Ottoman period as rewards for involvement with his military campaigns or for helping rural tax collection. In contrast, 3 million *fellahin* owned less than one *feddan*.⁹ These near landless represented about 75 per cent of landowners but only held 13 per cent of the total cultivable land. Those who owned the rest of the land were largely absentee landlords who lived luxurious lives. This led to many disturbances during the early twentieth century as poor farmers rebelled against their harsh living conditions.

Nasser wanted to break the hold of powerful rural elites, who would force the *fellahin* to vote en masse for whoever their masters wanted. The reforms gave the state the authority to seize an individual's privately held land that exceeded 200 *feddan*, a ceiling reduced to 100 *feddan* in 1961; however, families could still hold up to 300 *feddan*, and the amount a landlord could rent out was limited to 50 *feddan*. Exemptions were allowed where families had more than two children, where an additional 100 *feddan* could be retained. There were also exemptions to *wagf* land (endowed land held by religious authorities), desert land or land owned by industrial or scientific organizations. Landowners received compensation, except the royal family who lost 170,000 *feddan*.

Seized land was distributed to agricultural labourers and tenant farmers with holdings of less than 5 *feddan*. The recipients on average received 2.4 *feddan* and paid for the land in instalments over a 40-year period. There were almost 2 million beneficiaries of the reforms. Smallholders also benefited from an increase in land sales, as landowners feared expropriation or sequestration of their estates. The biggest impact of the reforms was felt by the largest and the smallest landholders. Those with less than 5 *feddan* increased by 13 per cent and the land they owned by 74 per cent. The biggest estates of more than 200 *feddan* disappeared. The reforms helped to improve income distribution, rural diets and levels of productivity.

According to El-Ghonemy (1999, 1993), the land reforms between 1952 and 1975 helped reduce poverty and promoted growth. One estimate is that rural poverty fell from a level of 56.1 per cent in 1950 to 23.8 per cent in 1965 (El-Ghonemy 1999:11). This reduction was not solely due to agrarian reform. The rural poor benefited from extensive government food and agricultural input subsidies, improved health and education provision. Yet the reforms might also have been more effective. Ceilings on landholdings remained high, so they did not substantially undermine the interests of big landlords. When challenged regarding their continued large holdings, the landowners simply signed land ownership to family members or used local or national patron-client links to influence policy implementation and keep the state off their backs.

Sadat began reversing Nasser's legacy in the 1970s by reducing the gains made by smallholders and tenants. He reinforced the economic and political strength of large landholders and removed elected farmers from representation in co-operatives and other rural institutions. In this he paved the way for the eventual passing of Law 96 of 1992.

⁸ The following section draws on Ray Bush, "Land reform and counterrevolution", in Bush (2002).

⁹ One *feddan* equals roughly one acre, or 0.4 hectare.

Exit left, enter right: Economic reform in agriculture

Agricultural reform was intended to redress the record of poor growth. Between 1981 and 1992 the average rate of real growth in the agricultural sector was about 2 per cent per annum. This was 2 per cent less than was thought to be necessary to sustain economic growth and far short of the GoE target of 5 per cent. Agricultural growth of 1.9 per cent in 1980–1985, down from 2.8 per cent in 1965–1980, was less than estimated population growth of 2.7 per cent per annum and government policies that had favoured food imports led to an estimated annual net deficit of \$3 billion in agricultural trade by the mid-1980s (Khedr et al. 1996:53).

Egypt's Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation (MALR) identified excessive government intervention during Nasser's presidency as the cause of a decline in agricultural productivity. These policies included price and marketing controls, state ownership of major agricultural industries and an overvalued exchange rate. By the early 1980s, the extent of the agricultural crisis led the GoE to work with USAID to formulate a reform programme.

While the statistical evidence is unreliable, it is estimated by USAID that agriculture in Egypt accounts for about 19 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), at least 36 per cent of employment and an estimated 22 per cent of commodity exports. According to USAID figures, half of Egypt's population of approximately 65 million lives in rural areas and industrial activity linked to agriculture, like the processing and marketing of commodities, and provision of agricultural inputs like water, fertilizer, pesticides and seeds, accounts for another 20 per cent of GDP and "a substantial portion of the work force".¹⁰

Egypt's agricultural sector reform, which began in the mid-1980s, predated the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme (ERSAP) agreed in 1991. The programme had two main elements to promote the withdrawal of the state from economic activity. The first was to liberalize markets and input provision. The second was to promote the production for export of high-value, low-nutrition foodstuffs and cut flowers for Europe.¹¹

USAID has been a major driving force in Egypt's strategy for liberalization and land tenure reform. It initiated two major programmes. The first was the Agricultural Production and Credit Project between 1986 and 1996 that cost \$289 million. This was followed by the Agricultural Policy and Reform Programme. Between 1986 and 1996, the emphasis of economic reform was market-led growth, liberalization of inputs and prices, and a smaller role for the state agricultural credit bank, the Principal Bank for Development and Agricultural Credit (PBDAC). There have also been debates with the World Bank regarding cost recovery in water, health and education provision more generally.

USAID's concern since 1996 has been to confirm changes in pricing policy, focus on export-led growth and encourage Egypt to emulate a US-farm-type model of extensive capital intensive agriculture. USAID is keen to reform price and marketing policies in cotton, rice, sugarcane, livestock and fertilizer. The benchmarks also include privatization of marketing and distribution, increased efficiency on public investment in agricultural research and the removal of consumer subsidies.

State intervention in general and the Nasserist reforms in particular, have been identified by both the GoE and the IFIs, the World Bank, IMF and USAID as *causing* Egypt's need to turn to the international agencies for help with debt reduction and policy reform. As USAID notes, "Due to state intervention, agriculture sector growth during the early to mid-1980s was very poor with value of production growing at less than 1 per cent per year".¹²

¹⁰ www.usaid.gov/eg/proj-agr.htm.

¹¹ For the programme see USAID (1998a, 1998b); GoE and USAID (1995); and website www.usaid.gov/eg/proj-agr.htm. For a detailed critique, see Bush (1999).

¹² www.usaid.gov/eg/proj-agr.htm.

The agricultural reform programme has been trumpeted as a success by academics and aid bureaucrats alike. It has been reflected, reformers argue, in an increase in the real value of crop production for the 23 major crops in the period 1980–1990; and an increase in farm incomes and a doubling of wheat production between 1986 and 1992 because of improved yields and area planted. There has also been a decline in food subsidies and the deregulation of controls on cropping patterns (Faris and Khan 1993; Fletcher 1996).

Yet beneath evidence of reform success lie several persistent concerns.¹³ There are six major areas that the reforms ignore or downplay and where there is a significant disjuncture between policy and actual outcomes. This helps prepare the way for debating the implications of Law 96 and possibilities for local political actions against reform.

1. The *evidential base* used by reformers is questionable as is the accuracy of data where often “guesstimates” are used to indicate aggregate production and growth figures.
2. Most arguments used by the protagonists of reform relate to the *early evidence* of increases in output and changes in cropping patterns, particularly in the period between 1986 and 1992. Yet there is little evidence that early improvements in productivity have been sustained and that early increases were due to price reform per se (Mitchell 1998:23).¹⁴
3. Productivity increases that were heralded by the IFIs seem not to have been sustained. The World Bank, for example, suggests that the rate of growth in agriculture since 1990 (apart from 1996–1997) has been less than for 1980–1987 (World Bank 2000b).
4. Any increase in agricultural exports has been surpassed by an increase in major agricultural *imports*. Most Egyptian agricultural imports include commodities characterized by low elasticity of demand, like wheat and edible oils, while most exports are marked by elasticity. Agriculture now contributes more than 33 per cent of Egypt’s trade deficit.
5. Economic reform has had a disastrous impact on employment. Fergany (2002) has estimated that job losses in agriculture for 1990–1995 alone were at least 700,000. Reform was premised upon high levels of national economic growth to create urban jobs to absorb displaced rural labour and for these jobs to be created by the private sector: there is little evidence of either.
6. Poverty levels have dramatically increased. The latest government Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) indicates that the level of poverty more than doubled in Egypt between 1990–1991 and 1995–1996 from 21 per cent to 44 per cent. The poverty line is defined by the cost of a minimum basket of nutrition. But if a more widespread criterion is used, such as a minimum income of \$1 (or equivalent in LE) per person per day, and we assume that LE500 is necessary for a family of five per month, the extent of poverty is far worse. By this measure more than 80 per cent of Egyptians are poor.

There is very little debate about Egypt’s agricultural future apart from the notion that it lies with the export of high-value horticultural products. The MALR and United States Embassy have indicated the need to press forward with agricultural reforms because the recent record has been less good than at the start of the reforms. This has been the institutional response rather than thinking further about the strategy itself, whether it is appropriate and how it might redress issues of poverty creation and persistent marginalization of poor, landless and near landless, and particularly women and women-headed households. The institutional response seems to be that policy will be effective if it is better implemented and if farmers are more conducive to market reform.

¹³ The detailed critique of the strategy has been dealt with elsewhere (Bush 1999; Mitchell 1998, 1999).

¹⁴ Mitchell is led to the conclusion that “the impact of the free-market reforms may have been greater on the statistics published by the state than on what farmers actually grow” (Mitchell 1998:23).

The failure of USAID to promote a policy of greater transparency and of greater sympathy with the majority of Egypt's farmers has played into the hands of Egypt's landed elite. That elite has taken advantage of the veil that market reform offers to repoliticize land as a significant but not openly debated policy issue. It was very evident from the "debate" about Law 96 of 1992 that farmers were regarded as lazy and as charlatans who had benefited after Nasser's reforms while landowners had lost status, wealth and political influence. Yet the way the legislative proceedings for Law 96 were affirmed and the way in which the media were unwilling to debate the impact of tenure reform on tenants demonstrated precisely the power and influence that landowners had to marginalize the interests of the rural poor. There was certainly an absence of any discussion for improved rural civil society or political and institution building for local governance.¹⁵ The *fellahin* have once more been characterized falsely as passive and malleable to central government policy making as policy makers suggest smallholder inefficiencies hold back strategies for agricultural modernization. Policy makers, it seems, misunderstand the complexity of the way in which rural production is organized and the benefits that might accrue to a society if farmers had the political institutions to represent and articulate their views.

Land tenure reform and political violence

We can now look in more detail at what the tenure reform of 1992 ushered in and what its rationale was. One issue is clear: the attempt to promote a more open and comprehensive land market failed. And it certainly did not lead to the emergence or the elements of a rural civil society in the form of organized NGO or other formal activity. Opposition to the land act was largely unco-ordinated, and was dealt with extremely harshly and brutally by security forces, who were in collusion with landowners. This prevented poor tenants from voicing their views. Spontaneous opposition to the act emerged piecemeal and did not spread across Egypt. It did not facilitate the development of NGOs and other associational groupings, nor did it protect and further peasant interests. Instead, there seems to have been a greater reliance upon family and kinship lines for coping with the rural disruption and increased poverty that followed tenure reform.

Law 96 of 1992 revoked Nasser's Agrarian Reform Law No. 178 of 1952 that had given tenants security of tenure and legalized the right to inherit tenancy agreements. The law was fully implemented in October 1997 after a five-year transition period. Contracts during the transition were intended to remain valid so rights to land could still be inherited but the rent after 1992 was increased from seven to at least 22 times the land tax. The land tax is revised every 10 years and is based on the fertility and location of the land. After 1 October 1997 all landowners could take back their land and charge tenants market-based rent, which in some cases increased to between LE 1,200 and LE 1,800 per *feddan*, an increase of 300–400 per cent depending on location and productivity. Tenancies became annual contracts renewed at the landowners' discretion, yet it is rare for an actual contract to exist. Landowners can dispose of their land without notifying tenants, who might have been farming the same plot for 40 years. Despite contract renewal, they remain vulnerable and insecure because of threats of eviction from landlords. Rents in many locations by 1997 had increased to LE 2,500 per *feddan*.

Despite the five-year transition most tenants simply did not believe that Law 96 would be implemented. Farmers in Giza and Daqahliya responded to questions about their preparation for the tenancy law by saying "President Mubarak would never allow such a law". And most tenants, it seems, heard about the proposed law from friends and neighbours rather than through any structured government media campaign. Perhaps as much as 15 per cent of Egypt's agricultural land is tenanted, and tenants may have access to their own family land as well as renting in land—some may also rent out land. This means the relationships of tenancy are complicated, and they vary from household to household, but no allowance was made for this in the drafting of legislation.

¹⁵ See Saad (2002, 1999) for detailed discussion of the way in which the tenancy bill became law and the way in which farmers in general and tenant farmers in particular were depicted by the state-controlled media.

Opposition to the implementation of the land act was downplayed by the GoE. The GoE characterized unrest as evidence of outside troublemakers or local Islamists. While the Fatwa high committee of Al Azhar, headed by the Grand Sheikh, adopted the GoE position that the new law was consistent with the Islamic view that people had the right to own private property, the radical Islamic group, Gamaa el Islamia, disagreed. It made several statements that any legislation that further impoverished the country's poor farmers must be opposed as un-Islamic.

Table 2: Recorded deaths, injuries and arrests in rural Egypt, January 1998–December 2000, relating to Law 96 and associated land conflict

Governorate	Deaths	Injuries	Arrests
Giza	12	116	169
Assuit	24	92	157
Sharkia	10	122	243
Minya	8	69	61
Dakhalia	6	21	36
Sohag	15	70	79
Damietta	—	—	42
Fayyum	6	44	103
Suez	—	—	7
Minoufia	1	35	84
Kalubia	4	34	46
Gharbia	5	58	123
Qena	13	53	66
Beheira	4	39	74
Aswan	1	8	3
Beni Suef	9	27	46
Port Said	—	25	30
Kafr El Sheikh	1	27	31
Ismailia	0	6	9
Total	119	846	1,409

Source: Land Centre for Human Rights, Cairo (2002).

Table 2 indicates the extent and geographical spread of violence linked to the implementation of Law 96. The figures for fatalities, injuries and arrests are indicative rather than complete.¹⁶ In spite of the fact that the Land Centre for Human Rights in Cairo has unprecedented access to Egypt's countryside and excellent informants, it remains difficult to assert the comprehensiveness of the data they supply. The figures reflect the growth in the politicization of land-related violence. This can be violence linked to dispossession of tenants by the forces of law and disorder—the security forces, landowners and thugs—but it also relates to the increase in conflict between farmers over disputed boundaries, irrigation and other issues. All these disputes seem to have increased following October 1997, when access to land was contested in a way that had not happened since 1952. Law 96 effectively gave a green light to landowners, including relatives of the Minister of Agriculture, to contest rights in land that went far beyond the terms and conditions of tenanted land.¹⁷ Many disputes that emerged after October 1997

¹⁶ Data for January to May 1997 indicates five deaths, 86 injuries and 167 arrests. Private communication with the Land Center for Human Rights, Cairo.

¹⁷ Descendants of Amin Wali, a large landowner in Fayoum, tried to regain land that had been confiscated from the family during Nasser's land reforms.

relate to landowners wanting to regain access to land that had been confiscated in the 1950s and that was not part of the terms of reference of Law 96.

Law 96 established for USAID “a more normal and balanced relationship between tenants and owners” (USAID 1999:2). Yet their understanding of the outcome of the law has been very narrow, focusing only on the view that the legislation helped to further a land market and thus the overall strategy of economic liberalization. They glossed over any notion of conflict and upheaval for the poor that accompanied the law and failed to ask questions about governance and rural institutions that went beyond recognizing that there was the need for legislative change to remove obstacles for rural organizations. USAID studies of land tenure since 1997 emphasized good relations between landlords and tenants where police were rarely used to settle disputes. The peaceful implementation of Law 96 was seen as a result of the creation of reconciliation committees by local officials. In contrast, the Land Center for Human Rights in Cairo noted that relations between owners and tenants in the Egyptian countryside after 1997 were often far from cordial. And where reconciliation committees were established, they were identified by tenants as working in the interests of landowners and often held proceedings in the intimidating presence of police and security officials.

One of the aims of Law 96 was to create more conducive conditions for market liberalization; part of this strategy was for owners to have the ability to sell their land if they wanted to. Before 1997 an owner could not sell until a settlement had been reached with the tenant. If tenants did not want to move from their tenancy, they could argue for continued access to part of the land they worked. After 1997 the landlord could do what he liked with the land that had previously been leased. This increased landlord power is seen by USAID and other IFIs as facilitating a land market. Yet this assertion implies that a market did not previously exist and that by empowering the wealthy the market will somehow work more efficiently.

USAID explains the slow development of the land market as a result of “difficulties from trying to prove land ownership” (USAID 1999:9). It concludes that a reform of land titling is now urgent so as to benefit from the change in landlord-tenant relations. Land registration procedures in Egypt are complicated. In many cases the land remains registered in the names of the people who owned it at the time of the first cadastre at the start of the twentieth century. Registration only took place if a conflict had previously arisen between landlords and tenants. Landlords are unable therefore to prove ownership of land by accessing deeds, but they can do so by producing contracts between themselves and tenants—although there are many cases where these have been forgeries. USAID has thus called for “the valid and up-to-date registration of land ownership...for future land market stability and continued investment in land improvements” (USAID 1999:9). The transaction costs for farmers to register land when it is sold are seen simply to be too high for an effective market in land to develop alongside the liberalization of other aspects of the agricultural sector. Islamic inheritance laws add to the problem for USAID because children are supposed to each inherit a portion of land (although females receive a smaller share than their male siblings); this fragments viable holdings.

Underpinning USAID’s concern with titling and land registration is the view that rural stability and increased productivity will only be forthcoming if landowners have security of tenure and legal rights of land alienation. There has been very little said about the associations that would be instrumental in facilitating the greater security posited as necessary for the land market. And there is little said about the need for a rural civil society that might promote greater representation to ensure checks against large and powerful landed interests. Economic adjustment has progressed for USAID from the macroeconomic concerns of the post-1991 period to the post-1996 demands of putting in place a regulatory framework that secures the interests of private capital and private land ownership in an accessible legal structure.¹⁸

¹⁸ It should be noted here that although the IFIs in Cairo seem intent on land titling elsewhere in Africa, the World Bank especially has declared a more nuanced view about tenure reform. See, inter alia, Adams (2000), Deininger and Binswanger (1999), and Toulmin and Quan (2000).

Clearly, one of the problems in focusing on titling is the reification of a land market, which excludes issues of security of access to land and landlessness, rural work and markets, the development of rural infrastructure, affordable production inputs and rural growth, and political representation. These issues need to be raised concurrently, rather than be offered as a vague by-product of economic reform. The emphasis on title and tenure reform oversimplifies local traditions of work and the prior existence of markets in land. Taken together, these shortcomings accelerate processes of rural social differentiation and class formation in which, since Law 96, the landless and near landless, and especially female-headed households and dispossessed are marginalized.

Formal and Informal Rural Resistance and Livelihoods

The GoE does not seem to have indicated the role it envisages for rural civil society. Its position on urban-based NGOs is draconian. The regime does not encourage civil society activity and that which exists is heavily policed. The more effective agencies have usually been those registered under civil law as private non-profit companies which also act effectively as NGOs. The Ibn Khaldun Centre was one of these until its director, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and associates were incarcerated by the GoE in 2001 for, among other things, being found guilty by a military court of receiving foreign funds without declaring them and bringing Egypt into disrepute. Although he was temporarily released on appeal, he was imprisoned again in 2002 for seven years on the same charges. The GoE does not encourage any political or associational group activity because it fears that the groups will generate opposition to the regime even if the activity is around issues which might be seen as marginal to local political reform.¹⁹ The donors have refused to promote the civil society card because they favour Egyptian political stability and regional influence, although the latter has diminished significantly.

The only formal policy instrument that is in place by the GoE is Sharouk, which was an initiative for integrated rural development driven by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and early donor interest regarding rural representation. Sharouk was intended to reduce the development divide between town and country. It was intended to improve the rural resource and service base, and local government institutions. Launched in 1994, its aims and objectives were to incorporate service provision for all Egyptian villages by 2002. It was to function until 2017 and promote infrastructural development, human resource development, and economic and institutional development. The programme's aims were to encourage "popular participation" and to provide "democratic channels for the participation of the rural population in the decision making process" (Institute of National Planning 1996:85). However, the programme's greatest achievements have been limited improvements in rural services like roads and drainage. There is no evidence that it is delivering even limited governance and institutional opportunities for farmers to voice their concerns to the GoE. While on paper Sharouk suggests greater opportunities for rural political participation, there is no evidence of mobilization and popular participation. Moreover the programme relies heavily on GoE financial support, which is not forthcoming as rural development is not a policy commitment.²⁰

In addition to using Sharouk to improve local governance, USAID identified another formal activity for enhancing local decision-making structures, namely, water-user associations (WUAs). These associations, which began in the mid-1990s, were formed to improve water

¹⁹ This is why the GoE opposed and disrupted Egyptian Palestinian solidarity groups who were frustrated from transporting aid to Gaza in 2001, which led to disturbances in el Arish. And it is possible to see Al Azhar student unrest in 2001, due to the Ministry of Culture's publication of material thought to bring Islam into disrepute, as a chance for students to protest restrictions on opportunities to voice their concerns, such as youth unemployment and the forming of organizations to promote the political participation of students.

²⁰ While the erstwhile Prime Minister Kamal Al-Ganzouri did seem sensitive to the need for rural development—he renamed the Ministry of Local Administration the Ministry of Rural Development in 1997, noting that "the new ministry aims to develop the rural areas which constitute a major and important sector in the structure of the Egyptian society"—there was no accompanying indication of the strategy or extra resources that would be used to promote effective rural development. See *Al Ahrām Weekly*, 10–16 July 1997.

delivery into *mesqas* (small irrigation canals), and to operate and maintain improved *mesqas* and improve on-farm water-user efficiency. USAID estimated that by 1999 there were 2,900 registered WUAs (USAID 1999:5).

USAID is very optimistic about the role of WUAs. It has argued that the WUAs have achieved greater “equity in the distribution of irrigation water while reducing the cost of irrigation”, and these improvements have extended to increasing crop productivity. USAID notes that “the establishment of water-user associations offers a success story for an institutional arrangement that can contend with the problem of using common property: irrigation water” (USAID 1999:5). Yet the optimistic write-up about WUAs glosses over many issues. It slurs over the mechanisms that ensure local dignitaries maintain a presence in determining WUA policies and strategies for irrigation, and a gender bias against women whose irrigation needs are often subordinated to male interests. The way in which gender issues are obscured by institutional structures has been highlighted in several recent reports (Ibrahim 1998).

Somaya Ibrahim noted in appraising several irrigation and WUA schemes that gender issues have been ignored and that WUAs tend to marginalize women in rural decision-making structures. This is not to downplay women’s struggles to maintain a voice within WUAs and in household structures across a whole range of activities including, but also going beyond, irrigation matters. However, as Ibrahim notes, “All members of the water associations are men. This male domination reflects the assumption that irrigation tasks in general and water management specifically is a male affair” (Ibrahim 1998:4).²¹

Ibrahim found that stereotypes regarding so-called women’s work and status informed the ways in which WUAs operated. For example, despite the fact that there were many de facto and de jure women-headed households, it was assumed women did not take part in irrigating land. There was thus little communication between women and men over issues of irrigation. Women were not, in Ibrahim’s Minia case study, consulted by WUAs regarding the selection of WUA board members, did not know the terms of reference of office holders, and did not have a voice in policy relating to the distribution of water. All board members were men, and this division over the administration of irrigation was mirrored in the distinction made by men and women in terms of the problems that they identified for agriculture. Men raised problems related to machinery and prices of irrigation, while women noted issues of water shortage because of competition with male users and night irrigation slots. As Ibrahim notes, “Needless to say it is the male farmers who can better defend their interests and get their turns at appropriate times during the day” (1998:4). It seems that while WUAs have been an initiative that has accompanied rural market liberalization, they have acted to promote the interests of many existing village office holders, dignitaries and landowners. Opportunities for voicing concerns of a broader range of rural social and class forces, women, landless and near landless have not improved.

Community development associations

There is at least one other recent development where an existing formal structure has been used to promote improved rural governance. This has been with the work of the development agency, CARE Egypt, with community development associations. CDAs are one of the two types of NGO allowed to register with MISA (along with welfare organizations). There has been much debate about these organizations, their effectiveness, independence and outreach, which will not be repeated here (Mahfouz 2001; Saad n.d.). The criticism of CDAs is that they lack autonomy and serve only the interests of the state. CDAs often deliver welfare benefits that the state should be delivering and subsidize government expenditure, but generate little improved governance because of tight MISA control. A recent example, however, of an attempt to empower CDAs with an opportunity to deliver resources *and* improve governance is highlighted in the work of one of CARE Egypt’s development initiatives.

²¹ Ibrahim studied gender biases in Minia and Minoufeya governorates.

In 2000, CARE Egypt, together with the Swiss Development Fund, initiated a project called Capability Enhancement through Citizen Action, or CAP (CARE 2000). This project is intended to “improve the quality of life including participation in civic affairs of 32,500 vulnerable households in rural communities of seven governorates of middle and Upper Egypt by 2003” (CARE 2000:2). While the strategy of a donor to improve local livelihoods is not new, CARE’s project concern with enhancing community participation does seem important. CARE’s work is unrelated directly to changes in land tenure and market liberalization, although clearly the burden of helping to improve rural livelihoods during economic reform has become a greater challenge, and they report an increase in the needs of respondents who recently lost land. CARE’s aim is to ensure 130 community-based NGOs in seven governorates “will be better able to represent and involve their constituencies in community affairs and decision making processes” (CARE 2000:3).

The innovation in CARE’s work seems to be the recognition that there might be some space for CDAs, often where they have lain dormant, to be energized and to become vehicles for greater rural decision making. A problem historically is that while CDAs may have been “on the books” since the 1960s, they often have been empty shells. Alternatively their local administration may have been dominated by landowners, rural elites and village sheikhs who act as local policemen and inform the government of any potential local unrest. CARE has thus sought to combine the improved efficiency of CDAs, reorganization of administration and decision making by involving the CDA in promoting a household livelihood/security framework for allocating donor resources.

One of the first questions that CARE asks the CDAs it works with is: “If you want to help the poor, are you willing to pay for change?” CARE has promoted a more rights-based approach to work – seeking, in their words, to move away from simple philanthropy. CARE admits that the big problem with this approach is that, for the livelihoods strategy to be effective, it is necessary for issues of local social differentiation and conflict to be recognized by CDAs.²² Ultimately, moreover, the CDAs must admit members of the disadvantaged groups in society to become office holders in the CDA. This involves the rich and powerful relinquishing authority and control of the CDAs, including *umdas* who were appointed by the government to keep control and act as local intelligence for possible sources of village conflict.

One of the target groups for CARE has been the landless and those who lost land following implementation of Law 96. In el Minia, CARE reactivated a traditional syndicate registered in the 1950s. It drew on an alliance of seven local CDAs and involved government and non-government personnel in the idea of recasting the roles of CDAs to actively include people in the local community that the CDAs claimed to support. In Sohag, the idea of using CDAs was taken further. An association for *tarahil* (labour migrants) was established. These *tarahil* worked for subcontractors and would often go long periods without payment, especially during the liquidity crises of 1999–2001. They were encouraged to convene collectively to defend their legal employment rights. In this, the group seemed to have benefited from visiting the Better Life Association (BLACD) in el Minia, which has had success in defending worker and welfare rights for quarry workers.

CARE’s work, still in its early stages, has highlighted the possibility of concentrating on an existing structure within civil society, seeking to revitalize it. Working with local and central government personnel and institutions, CARE has operated fully within the restrictive practices of the Egyptian state, and persuaded bureaucrats and villages of the benefits of CDAs having more open and accessible rural decision-making structures. Reinvigorating CDAs is intended to initiate a round of debate about local democracy and greater participation for landless and smallholders. The intention is to help the reactivation of CDAs by facilitating greater opportunities for younger elements and the poor. CARE seems to be more optimistic about the outcome of this work in the newer CDAs, where landless and day labourers can more

²² Interview with CARE, July 2001.

effectively express their concerns. It seems too that unemployed university graduates or technical graduates who return to the countryside might help develop a movement that demands local change, greater representation and more opportunities for younger people. It is too soon to see how sustainable this strategy will be and whether it will weaken existing undemocratic forces within CDAs. It is also unclear whether other donors are prepared to invest in CDAs as possible vehicles for promoting local governance. And while individual CARE workers and others linked to the attempt to empower CDAs may be optimistic about their liberalizing potential, it is also necessary to note that CARE works fully with central and local government agencies. That ensures that CARE can deliver on its promises and legitimizes the donors' strategy. However, it might also be a way for the Egyptian state to promote hegemony. Yet, as in most of these processes of negotiation between donors, states and social forces, there is a dialectic of struggle at work. This means that there is always a possibility that, while the forces of the state are dominant, they are not immune from social and class pressure to change or develop conditions for rural civil society. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, there is little indication that the struggles between these competing forces are being resolved in the favour of smallholders or the rural poor.

Informal rural civil society

Egypt does not have a rural civil society in the sense of one that is autonomous and active, free and able to organize and publicize as well as politicize agendas for action to redress grievances, government neglect and facilitate associational life. Since the land act was fully implemented and the consequences of economic reform for increasing rural poverty intensified in 1997, there has been more active use of informal mechanisms, usually through family support, to provide a safety net against market failure. There was a tendency at the time to see the absence of mass rural revolt against landlords as another example of farmer quietude. Yet there were bloody confrontations, usually in the governorates like Daqahliya where there were large landholdings and landowners were impatient to test the legality of Law 96. In el Zeni, Daqahliya, a landlord sold 82 *feddans* that had been rented to 126 tenants, and he needed the help of security forces to ensure new landowners could take possession of the land. Protesting villagers were tear-gassed, 90 arrested and seven imprisoned more than 120 kilometres from their village for 45 days.

It seemed inevitable that a government that had used the threat from Islamists as a reason to maintain the state of emergency and deploy the military would blame outside forces for the dissent that emerged.²³ Yet the favoured view of authoritarian regimes (and liberal democratic ones too) of blaming dissent with unpopular legislation on terrorist activity rather than recognizing it as a legitimate criticism of government policy does not withstand scrutiny. The extent of continued rural unrest caused by disputes over land is indicated in table 2 above. It is now important to try and indicate a way of understanding it.

One fruitful attempt to understand opposition to state and dominant class action in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East has been offered by Asef Bayat. He has used a notion of "quiet encroachment of the ordinary".

This refers to non-collective direct actions of individuals and families to acquire basic necessities (land, shelter, urban collective consumption, informal jobs, business opportunities) in a quiet, unassuming fashion (Bayat 2000:iv).

Bayat formulated the idea of quiet encroachment (1997, 1998, 2002) while discussing essentially urban unrest. It is for him

qualitatively different from defensive measures or coping mechanism. ... It represents a silent, protracted, pervasive advancement of ordinary people—through open-ended and fleeting struggles without clear leaderships,

²³ *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 10–16 July 1997.

ideology or structured organisation – on the propertied and powerful in order to survive (Bayat 1997:5).

One of the reasons Bayat gives for this type of struggle is the outcome of the Nasserist social contract with the working class and peasantry. Effectively, as indicated earlier, the relationship Nasser established in the 1950s and which has had the most serious consequences for Egypt's political history since was the social contract: the state provided basic services while the subordinate classes agreed to political passivity. However, the peasantry did not agree to passivity. There are many cases of political opposition and violent antagonism being expressed by the *fellahin* to landlords and the state.²⁴ Yet, according to Bayat, the legacy is that political struggles have often taken the form of individualistic solutions to problems instead of class or group solidarities being the major vehicle for opposition.

Bayat has also noted that, in the 1990s, while trade unions often opposed the austerity packages of the IFIs, these bodies represent only a small proportion of the workforce, not only in Egypt but the Middle East region as a whole. The majority of workers toil in small-scale informal locations in the urban economy, and it is therefore in these areas, among neighbourhoods and within communities, that Bayat has argued collective action might find support and opportunities for success. This may well be a useful model to examine in relation to recent rural struggles over land access, access more generally to resources as well as outputs and market power. Yet more research is needed to demonstrate that farmers are doing anything more than adopting coping strategies in the face of worsening hardship rather than actually taking the initiative themselves to recover lost ground.

Since October 1997, tenants have experienced a dramatic increase in the level of poverty resulting from changed lifestyles as a result of being expelled from their land. There has been an increase in rural debt, dispossession and enforced proletarianization – the search for wage employment often in harsh labour regimes that are reminiscent of indentured and contract labour. This has had a particular impact on child labour. Children have been removed from school as recently dispossessed families try and compensate for loss of agricultural income by reducing schooling costs.

Significantly there has been an increase in rural *insecurity*. Evidence suggests at best a very uneven level of information reached tenant farmers regarding implementation of Law 96. Many respondents in Giza and Daqahliya either simply did not know about Law 96 (despite its five-year transition period from 1992 to 1997), or had not been informed regarding the content of the new legislation and how it would impact on tenants. There had been scant regard paid by government to farmers' access to information and formal networks like co-operatives; local and village councils were unclear both about the law and its consequences, especially about the legal rights of tenants to appeal the non-renewal of contracts. Tenants had not been informed about the legislation in a systematic way. There had been no provision of information by either central government or governorate authorities regarding Law 96, and many tenants learned of its dramatic implication on 1 October 1997 – when landlords refused to renew rental contracts.

One group of tenants was especially affected by a decline in their livelihoods: women who headed households and worked tenancies registered in their late husband's name. These women were expelled from the land in October 1997. They either could not pay the new, higher rents, or were victims of prejudiced landlords who did not want to renew women. Women in this category whom I interviewed periodically over a 20-month period, 1999–2001, seem to confirm a pattern of greater reliance upon family and neighbours for accessing resources and defending livelihoods. While people admitted to tensions within the village community in Giza and Daqahliya as a result of Law 96, it was also the case that the lines of cleavage between

²⁴ The bloody episode at Kamsheesh is one illustration. On 30 April 1966, the peasant leader Salah Hussein was murdered in Kamsheesh by assassins hired by the powerful landowning Figgi family. The family refused to hand over land earmarked by the state for sequestration, and peasant opposition mounted to ensure legal rights of smallholders and landless were met. See Brown (1990).

landlords and tenants within the community may have reinforced family and kinship bonds, while also stretching these bonds to the limit in their uneven delivery of material assistance.

While women respondents had not engaged in direct opposition to the land act nor tried to establish a formal organization to oppose the act's implementation, they had promoted a range of actions that sought to defend their original position. Many had tried to use networks of family and kin to put pressure on landlords not to dispossess them, although this was not successful. The women had experienced a dramatic loss of income after 1997. One respondent who previously had a net income of LE6,965 was reduced to accepting infrequent loans of LE25–50 from relatives, handouts from an Islamic charity, and had to take her children out of school and send them to work in neighbouring fields. Another respondent who in 1999 had managed to keep her son in school, had to remove him in autumn 2000 to work as a carpenter. He complained of the hard life that he was forced into at 14 and blamed her for it. And while she hoped that one day he would have a workshop of his own to sustain the family, she herself had become a seasonal agricultural labourer picking vegetables when there was enough demand. Other respondents became dependent upon charity, help from family and child labour.

Respondents had also sold jewellery to raise cash for daily living expenses or pay for a daughter's wedding, and two of the respondents had managed to eke out a living on savings from livestock sales in October 1997 when they lost the land, yet by 2001 these savings were exhausted.

For women respondents in Giza and Daqahliya, depending on family for loans, using the opportunity to visit on weekends for a respite, thereby lessening weekly expenditure, was central to coping with economic difficulty. It nevertheless remained extremely difficult for respondents to transform increased reliance upon family and friends into a strategy to oppose the reasons for their new poverty. It was also not always possible to see that elements of a strategy for "quiet encroachment of the ordinary", conflicts over land and access to rural resources, was transforming coping mechanisms into a proactive strategy against those responsible for accelerated rural poverty.

Conclusion

Egypt does not have a healthy civil society. Attempts to enliven it beyond the watchful eyes of the state and its cronies have not been successful. This is not surprising, given the history that was traced early in this paper. It is also the case that, because associational life itself can so easily be hijacked by both governments and donors, perhaps the absence of civil society in this form should not be too loudly lamented. But civil society is more than just associational life. It involves the struggles within the state and beyond it that embody the many ways in which the dominant classes try to ensure the reproduction of their dominance. In this the GoE has been very successful. For while there might occasionally be signs of dissatisfaction with economic reform, market liberalization and broader regional issues, demonstrations, wildcat strikes and even the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary", nowhere have these been able to come close to a counter-hegemonic political movement.

It remains remarkable that criticism of Egypt's agricultural strategy, including Law 96, has been limp, ineffectual and unfocused. Some university academics, and even departments, have reported on the devastating impact of increased poverty linked with economic reform, but internal security discouraged any attempt to hold meetings with affected farmers or mobilize even peaceful dissent. The agricultural co-operatives have been devastated, rural trade unions are non-existent, and agricultural research centres keen to accrue donor resources have complied readily with the message of market prudence and economic liberalization.

One of the problems in mobilizing an academic and intellectual opposition to land tenure reforms has been the difficulty in making a case for the necessity of reform without capitulating to the IFI and GoE agenda. The “debate” about market liberalization has crudely and naively parroted the mantra that the Nasserist “socialist” period was the cause of Egypt’s economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, and the only alternative was state retrenchment and economic liberalization. This dominant discourse is a disservice to the credibility of the tremendous vitality of Egyptian intellectual life and has led to a neglect of debates around the crises of rural livelihoods. For where academics and party political leaders have sought to use the parliament or newspapers to criticize the GoE, it has invariably been a critique of the impact of reform on Egypt’s macroeconomy, or on its urban landscape and social forces. Egypt’s *fellahin* remain the forgotten souls. They do speak out but to each other and usually only in muted terms and with little impact on an aloof urban elite. There is little evidence that Egypt’s reforms are promoting new configurations in rural civil society, and the possibilities for future effective rural mobilization are bleak.

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