

## Land, Legitimacy and Governance in Contemporary Cairo

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### Summary

Governance over land in Cairo, Egypt has, for decades, benefited a narrow elite at the expense of the wider population. Extant institutions and processes deciding who can use land for what purpose produced significant economic inequality, hindered economic growth and was used as a tool to stifle political development. Debate over how land resources will be governed is a critical dimension present in renegotiations of the Egyptian social contract.



*Figure 1. A Cairene who had just voted in the March 2011 Constitutional Referendum (credit: M. Ansari)*

### Land

The legitimacy crisis leading to the January 25 Revolution in Egypt resulted from an inability to craft an inclusive vision regarding the disposition of Egypt's resources for its population by the previous regime. In a country that is more than 90% desert, land is one of Egypt's most precious resources. Cairo is a city of nearly 20 million, or one quarter of the national population; boundaries between agriculture and urban, state and private, and popular versus elite are often blurry<sup>1</sup>. In this context, Cairo becomes the site of intense struggle over land.

Contradictions abound: overcrowded apartments house a majority of citizens without legal tenure and lie in disrepair, while vast tracks of land are developed into speculative and wholly vacant suburbs. Land distribution scandals washed the pages of newspapers regularly, even before the January 25 revolution. Nevertheless, only a few have been prosecuted as mechanisms for accountability are both thwarted and underdeveloped within a system of land governance geared more toward patronage than economic, social or environmental sustainability.

Yet Cairo transcends these dichotomies it seems to offer in abundance. The majority of land is informally urbanized. Visitors and many residents of the city, however, would be

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<sup>1</sup> Sims, D. (2011) *Understanding Cairo: the Logic of a City Out of Control*. Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press.

hard pressed to accurately differentiate between the illegally and legally constructed 12-story, reinforced concrete buildings housing the plurality of Cairo's residents<sup>2</sup>.

### **Governance backslide**

Decades of de facto land policy have contravened what once existed on paper. While local governments have existed for decades, they have virtually no capacity to make decisions surrounding land use changes, distribution or the nationalization of well-located but underutilized land. Formal policies of "self-reliance" have reduced the capacity of local governments to provide a minimum of service by eliminating revenue control<sup>3,4</sup>. Moreover, such bodies aren't elected; governors are appointed by the national administration.

Local governance over one of the country's most precious resources waned. Meanwhile, a multiplicity of overlapping national ministries and party power brokers jockeyed for control over the ability to ration land and tacit permission for illegal subdivision as part of an elaborate system of patronage politics<sup>5,6</sup>.

### **Navigating the informal alleys of governance**



*Figure 2. Two types of informal housing construction: resident constructed on marginal land in foreground, contractor built on formerly agricultural land in background (credit: N. Hamilton)*

Fieldwork conducted immediately before and after the protests leading the departure of Hosni Mubarak shed light on just how people of many social strata navigate the landscape of patronage and ineffective bureaucracies. In interviews, taxi rides and impromptu neighborhood debates prior to January 25, the message of residents was one of frustration toward the injustices within the system of governance over land. After the protest, despite fear things would continue on without palpable reforms, there was the overwhelming sense of hope that the demands of protestors would lead to reforms to improve urban life.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Sims, personal communication, January 12, 2011

<sup>3</sup> Dorman, WJ. Of Demolitions and Donors: The Problematics of State Intervention in Informal Cairo. In *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space, and Global Modernity*. Singerman, D Cairo: American University in Cairo Press (2009)

<sup>4</sup> Ben Nefissa, personal communication, January, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Singerman, D. (1996) *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Singerman D. (2009) *Cairo contested: Governance, Urban space, and Global Modernity*. Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press.

Cairo, and other Egyptian cities, suffers from a very weak administrative system due to extreme centralization, lack of transparency and inter-ministry fragmentation as a result of a political system based significantly on patronage. More than 30 different agencies are currently responsible for decision making about land in Greater Cairo<sup>7</sup>. Several ministries may prospect for land and subsequently redistribute all or part of said land including the Ministries of Petroleum<sup>8</sup>. The military also controls vast amounts of land within metropolitan Cairo<sup>9</sup>. The Ministries of Petroleum, Antiquities, Tourism, Defense, Military Production and more must approve many Ministry of Housing projects<sup>10</sup>. Locally elected municipal councils have very little say in such circumstances; the residents who may already inhabit a scheduled project have less.

Local and international NGOs have a significant presence in numerous underserved areas, providing much needed infrastructure and services. By absolving itself of responsibility to deliver municipal services, or administer land in an economically viable manner, while allowing others to pick up the tab, the regime had been able to extend the system of patronage. This form of privatization allows for individuals to assume credit for projects, such as sewers or telecom, typically considered a public mandate<sup>11</sup>.

### **What's on paper?**

A combination of significantly decreased public investment in housing and infrastructure after the 1962 war resulted in the massive growth of illegal conversion and subdivision of agricultural land to urban purposes. Extremely restrictive rent control laws and internal migration within Egypt exacerbated the phenomenon<sup>12</sup>. It is estimated that a majority of Cairo's residents do not inhabit their homes legally<sup>13</sup>. While much of this housing on illegally converted agricultural land is of fairly robust



*Figure 3. Foreground shows the wall of an inhabited home cut in half during a government demolition (credit: M. Hutchison)*

<sup>7</sup> Singerman D. (2009) *Cairo contested: Governance, Urban space, and Global Modernity*. Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press.

<sup>8</sup> L. El-Shawarby, personal communication, March 23, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Sims, D. (2011) *Understanding Cairo: the Logic of a City Out of Control*. Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank (2007). *Analysis of Housing Supply Mechanisms Final Note* (ISBN Report no. 41180).

<sup>11</sup> M. Ayyad, personal communication, March, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank (2007). *Analysis of Housing Supply Mechanisms Final Note* (ISBN Report no. 41180).

<sup>13</sup> Sims, D. (2011) *Understanding Cairo: the Logic of a City Out of Control*. Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press.

construction, it has not benefitted from municipal services such as schools, policing, transportation and other infrastructure.

Other types of informally developed housing, especially on desert land, has been deemed unsafe by various government bodies. Such land, however, is not necessarily inherently unsafe. Government plans, such as the Cairo 2050 visioning document, intend to replace large areas of informally occupied land deemed unsafe with high-end real estate developments. Displacement envisioned by the Cairo 2050 plan could push millions of residents further from the city center, limiting access to transportation, public services, and perhaps most importantly, jobs.

### **The way forward**

Transparency of land resource allocation and use decisions, formal systems of public notification, engagement and review will be critical elements of a democratic management of land, one of the country's most valuable resources. All are painfully absent in Cairo's present institutional milieu. Reforms in this area are essential to achieve demands set forth by protesters. These changes will improve economic growth, equity and will reverse the negative role governance over land has played in the patronage politics of Cairo and Egypt.

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