

Urban Egypt: On the Road from Revolution to the State? Governance, the Built Environment, and Social Justice

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**URBAN EGYPT: ON THE ROAD FROM
REVOLUTION TO THE STATE?
GOVERNANCE, THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT,
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

ABSTRACT

Three years after the Egyptian revolution, demands for social justice continue to be articulated but remain largely unfulfilled. Many of those demands revolve around the need for urban development, including more equitable spatial distribution of public services, further democratization of planning processes and local government, and urban development policies which serve the general public, rather than wealthy residents, foreign investors, or real estate speculators. Unfortunately, the current urban local administrative system lacks representativeness and does not allow for local participation. More recently, there have been a growing number of mobilized initiatives that are searching for ways to build a more reciprocal relationship between urban communities and the state. Yet the government remains ambivalent to further democratize local administration and local politics and increase representation at the local level, and continues to design and implement plans that do not address the urban challenges affecting the daily lives of millions of Egyptians.

Building on the work of “TADAMUN: The Cairo Urban Solidarity Initiative,” and in light of global experiences in participatory local governance, this article argues that reforming local government through institutionalizing communication channels between citizens and the state and broadening their engagement through coalitions, creating new channels for government accountability and responsiveness, and providing more equitable services, may help meet the

demands for social injustice generated by the 2011 Revolution and consolidate the democratic process in Egypt.

KEYWORDS:

Egypt, participatory governance, decentralization, urban development, local politics

The post-revolutionary era is nearing its third anniversary. Popular mobilization and protests continue to emerge in new political spaces and in new forms. Protest has become ordinary and while some political forces are re-imagining themselves and maintaining their legitimacy and popularity, others are fading away or suffering from renewed government repression.

Over the past three years there have been many controversial changes at the national political level. Yet, at a more local level, newly mobilized initiatives have searched for ways to build a more reciprocal relationship between urban communities and the state and its ministries, broadening their support and capabilities in the process. The demand for social justice over the last three years has also been articulated in a way to draw new attention to the problems of urban Egypt, including demands for a more equitable spatial distribution of public services, further democratization of planning processes and local government, and urban development policies which serve the general public, rather than wealthy residents, foreign investors, or real estate speculators. Not surprisingly perhaps, despite the widely declared demands of the 2011 Revolution, there remains deep government ambivalence to further democratize local administration and local politics and increase representation at the local level. We argue that this remains an impediment to normalizing and democratizing state-society relations.

THE REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT

Immediately preceding and during the January 2011 Egyptian Revolution, Cairo and other parts of the country experienced massive protest and collective resistance which had evolved out of pre-revolutionary protest from a variety of organizations and groups. The strength of local communities was demonstrated by the rapid and impressive formation of *Ligan Cha'biyya* (or neighborhood committees) as police and security forces withdrew from the city on January 28, 2011 following violent police repression.

After the fall of the Mubarak regime on February 11, newly mobilized groups and initiatives realized that they needed to remain active and increase their strength to realize the main goals of the Revolution: freedom, dignity, and social justice. In fact, some of the new initiatives understood that in order to survive and contest the 'remnants' and powers of the old regime they needed to institutionalize themselves to

address other problems, as difficult as that has proven to manage.

Other groups continued to stage public political protests, hoping to influence the direction and composition of the new government, yet distancing themselves from state engagement, fearing they would be tainted or corrupted by power. After any regime change, some groups succeed in negotiating the move beyond mobilization to institutionalize their demands by engaging with a state, forcing it to change its authoritarian cast. Other initiatives lose their popularity and simply fade away, or fail in their concerted attempts to reform the state (of course, there is great diversity in these paths). The challenge of transforming the Egyptian state remains almost as difficult as it was before the 2011 uprising.

IMPLEMENTING THE REVOLUTION: IMMEDIATE DEMANDS AND INITIATIVES

Social justice was one of the major frames of the Revolution and it continues to motivate protest and collective action, particularly since economic conditions have worsened. Revolutionaries, civil society groups, and new political parties articulate an agenda around social justice as they demand bread (or more abstractly, an adequate standard of living), the equitable and efficient delivery and provision of public services and stronger labor rights.

Revolutionary strategies and contestation during the past two years has included protests and sit-ins, litigation to realize civil, political, and land rights (Kazeboon), and Do-it-Yourself Governance (such as communities building their own on/off ramps to the Ring Road, appropriating open land for diverse purposes). Activists have also used social media to monitor public services and demand greater local government accountability ('Ayziin Ne'yish/We Want to Live), organizing nonpayment movements as well (Mish Dafa'yiin/We Won't Pay) out of frustration over failures in public service delivery. Other initiatives have organized public spectacles to shame government officials for their ineptitude such as throwing garbage over the gates of Governorate or Ministry offices.

THE POST JANUARY 2011 REGIMES: TWO PATHS TO CHANGE

As a consequence of the Revolution generally fair elections were held, two rounds of constitutional reforms were launched, and a plethora of new political parties, new leaders, and new groups emerged. At the time, there were two different paths to political change articulated by various actors in Egypt. The first path included strategies to reform the state (including how the state proposes to reform itself) and priorities for constitutional and electoral reform. The second path coalesced around local community initiatives which deployed strategies to address immediate needs through political protest, revolutionary initiatives, and legal activism. Yet both these paths shared a surprising disinterest in *transforming* local government and local politics and democratizing it further. Without local government reforms, this article argues, broader citizen engagement and demands for government accountability and responsiveness and more equitable service provision will fall far short of expectations generated by the 2011 Revolution. Our analysis emerges out of the work of “TADAMUN: The Cairo Urban Solidarity Initiative” which has been working since 2011 to promote the idea that all citizens have an equal right to their city, as well as a shared responsibility towards it. We strive to work with all stakeholders to build alliances and coalitions to encourage change and introduce realistic alternatives and solutions for existing urban problems via our field work, policy briefs, public seminars and meetings, and public outreach. Rather than more undemocratic and elitist decisions, we explore and promote new urban policies that are more effective, equitable, participatory, and sustainable. Despite the complexity of urban challenges, many initiatives, including TADAMUN, are working to forge cooperation and solidarity among local residents, activists, government officials, architects, housing rights activists, civil society, local initiatives, and planners to address these critical issues (see www.tadamun.info for more information about our project and its activities). If this agenda seems naïve or unrealistic, simply ignoring the root problems of our cities and governance failures, is not an option either.

The First Path: Attempts to Reform the State

Despite public crises over the provision of public services (water, petrol, and electricity shortages) that emerged during the first two years of the Revolution, the elected government of President Mohamed Morsi tried to shift responsibility for public services to the people and promoted austerity and rationing. For example, one of the first major initiatives of President Morsi’s government was “*Watan Nazif*” or “A Clean Homeland” and citizens were asked to sweep the streets of the accumulated garbage. The Morsi government did not take responsibility for the garbage problem or force internal and bureaucratic changes

to solve it. In its rhetoric, the Morsi government argued that the solution to state reform was greater efficiency, better management, and ethical integrity. It should have engaged the *zabaleen* (a longstanding community of refuse collectors who reside in Manshiet Nasr and who recycle the garbage), privately-contracted companies, and other stakeholders in the waste sector, particularly within the state, to serve the public interest, rather than blame citizens for the garbage in the streets (see Fahmy and Sutton 2010; Furniss 2012).

It is important to note that pre-revolutionary planning paradigms were still intact despite the fervor of revolutionary frames and dreams for a new government led by the Freedom and Justice Party (see Singerman 2009). The Morsi government continued the Mubarak policy of building additional new cities in the desert, separating communities from employment options and their social ties, and further segregating the city along class lines. For example, in May 2013, the Minister of Housing declared a plan to build 44 new cities all over Egypt between 2013 and 2052. This endeavor was supposed to commence immediately with the construction of al-Fairuz City in Port Said, and the New Alama City on the North Coast (Nagila 2013). Morsi's housing initiatives were designed to be somewhat more affordable, but he continued using public funds to create even more isolated, unpopular new cities rather than devising more creative and sustainable policies of furthering *in situ* development of Cairo's informal areas so that people could remain near their jobs, families, and social networks.

The Second Path to Change: Local Community Initiatives

The second path to change relies upon community activism to further social justice and address immediate local needs. This path utilizes political protest, mobilization, and legal activism and presents new narratives and terminologies to the public. Such entities as *Ligan Cha'biyya* (Popular Committees) and *'Itilafaat Shabbab* (Youth Coalitions) were all products of revolutionary mobilization when people started to explore the boundaries of collective action during the government's absence and security vacuum. What started in the beginning as an effort to protect local neighborhoods and streets during a political and security crisis as the revolution unfolded in early 2011 grew into collective efforts to provide community services (Bremer 2011). This role developed even further where some community groups started making claims on the government and monitoring the government's provision of public services.

There were successful examples of this way of engaging with the State – the most obvious one being the Revolution itself – and some demands were achieved after prolonged contestation. However, this type of activism has *not* changed the state itself nor forced the state

and its leadership to enhance social justice in regard to the built environment at various scales. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, the power of these new local initiatives was often ephemeral since they were voluntaristic, unrepresentative, and poorly or irregularly funded.

Nevertheless, there are many example of such community activism: a group of activists managed to stop and reverse demolition decrees issued by the Prime Minister for two architecturally significant buildings through contestation, sit-ins, and use of social media in Alexandria. In Boulaq Abul-Ela and Boulaq al-Dakrour the *Ligan Cha'biyya* acted in place of the dissolved elected Local Councils and monitored the provision of public services in their neighborhoods through agreements with both Cairo and Giza Governorates. In a densely populated area of Muhandasiin – Mit 'Uqba – the popular committee negotiated with the local district authorities to realize a long-stalled expansion of natural gas lines to the community and the repaving of its alleyways in a much more cost effective manner. They were able to play such a role by accessing detailed information about the cost of labor and materials for the paving project in the more open political climate after 2011, although they had to struggle to convince the local authorities to work with them and not in isolation from the community. They also contributed labor to the project, monitored it, and were able to lower the project's costs so that they were able to extend the street paving from two small streets, to nine (see TADAMUN 2013).

Such initiatives “claimed” political space and engaged with the state during a moment of political flux to achieve short-term goals and resolve issues related to their communities or their direct interests. However, in the long run there are no guarantees that such claimed political space will survive.



Photo 1: Members of the Meet Oqba Popular Committee for the Defense of the Revolution lay paving stones in their streets after the installation of a new gas line. The Popular Committee lobbied the Giza Governorate successfully to improve the neighborhood's gas infrastructure and to adopt a community-based plan to pave the roads. Community volunteers provided labor support and monitored the contractors. Photo Credit: TADAMUN/Salma Belal.

TRANSITIONS AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF REVOLUTIONARY GOALS: TARGETING AND ENGAGING THE STATE

Local initiatives face a challenge about how to generate functional synergies between institution-building and mobilization. The challenge facing activists is how to move beyond protest to institutionalizing power. How can the state and its institutions as well as local bodies be transformed to embody revolutionary ideals?

Not surprisingly, in 2013 both during the Morsi government and after it was deposed, revolutionaries and their activism were pushed aside by the reconsolidated state and political parties who were anxious to protect their newly-won power and consolidate their political base. "Claimed" political space of protest and demonstrations is disappearing and the government and communities may soon question the "representativeness" of local initiatives if they do not institutionalize themselves further. The question which faces many of these groups is whether their priorities should continue to focus on

direct community needs, or whether they should, in parallel, demand more state recognition and institutionalized, legal representation?

Unfortunately, the current urban local administrative system is impermeable to input from outside the governmental apparatus (i.e. little local participation and public outreach, public hearings, community vetting or approval of local government policy). In these circumstances, it is very difficult for a local initiative to force or persuade the government to listen to them. Can anyone under the current institutional framework really have a voice in governmental development plans? Shortly after the Revolution, local municipal people's councils were disbanded and thus it is only the executive councils at the local level who are managing local affairs, with little official citizen participation (See TADAMUN 2013b for more information about the limitations of local administration in Egypt). At the same time, even if the long-promised municipal elections are held after the upcoming Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2014, will their members be able to influence development plans and contest policies with the executive councils, national ministry staff, and the governorate given their lack of technical knowledge and relative political weakness? Real power remains in the hands of the central government and its local bureaucratic institutions.

Clearly, there has *not* been significant change in local politics or local administration at the bottom of the governmental system. The articles which regulate local administration promulgated in the 2012 Constitution were very disappointing to many and largely maintained the highly centralized and managerial character of local administration from the Mubarak era. For instance, these articles do not allow citizens to elect their own governors or mayors. The post-revolutionary Constitutions did not give the Local Municipal Units more autonomy to raise their own funds at the local level or allow them greater control and management of the services usually delivered by the central level in Egypt, such as healthcare and education. One new positive dimension of the articles in the new constitution related to local government is that the minimum age of candidates for the local councils was lowered to 21 years of age and a quarter of seats are allocated to youth and another quarter to women.

For those interested in deepening democracy in Egypt, we have to ask how current (and proposed) boundaries of participation and representation can be broadened beyond elected local councils. How can local initiatives shift their attention to mobilizing and building broader constituencies and coalitions towards these ends? Although often discounted in the past, civil society and local initiatives need to redirect their energy and demands to this level of politics and focus on transforming local government into capable, responsive, transparent and accountable entities instead of being a dumping ground or safety net for retired military/police personnel (see Sayigh 2012).

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF LOCAL INITIATIVES?

Local Initiatives Maximize Use of Local Knowledge and Resources

First, there are many important roles which local initiatives can play to promote the counter-narrative of *in-situ* development and devise localized solutions utilizing local knowledge to solve social justice issues instead of top-down “one-size-fits-all” policies. Local initiatives should pressure the government to invest financial resources where the majority of residents live.¹ A coalition of initiatives promoting a new urban paradigm can be critical players in demanding a transition from “A City for the Few” to “A City for All.” Everyone in Cairo should enjoy the “right to the city” – an idea that cities belong to everyone, and everyone should have a say in envisioning and creating its future to conform to their needs and aspirations. The set of collective urban and environment-related rights included within the notion of the “right to the city” promotes the common well-being of all inhabitants and encourages all citizens to participate in the planning and decision-making processes that affect their living environment.

Complementing the Role of the State: «القفة أم ودنين. يشيلوها اتنين» (A Basket with Two Handles should be carried by Two People)

The Egyptian state is too “soft” today (administratively, financially, and politically) to control urban development and it needs partners to complement government resources. In fact, the state has far fewer resources than it did before the Revolution and expectations for change and progress are still high. The state needs to recognize its limits, seek out citizen contributions and partner with them, and value the community assets (human, physical, social, financial, and natural assets) of the entire city rather than to stigmatize the poor and informal areas and underestimate their internal resources, as it has been doing for decades. The state needs to explore and expand channels to collaborate with new initiatives in an institutionalized and mutually beneficial manner.

Local Initiatives are Good for Democracy

Participatory governance can deepen democracy as we have seen in several global cases such as Brazil or India. Greater participation at the local level not only enhances claims-making on the state but it can be an indirect way to deepen representative democracy by creating a more demanding and engaged citizenry. In other words, participation is not only an end but a means to more representation.

1. SIMS 2011.

After entrenched authoritarian rule there is a great need to increase public deliberation and government legitimacy and the state must open up more “invited spaces” to non-state actors, particularly those who mobilized successfully to end authoritarian regimes.²



Photo 2: A neighborhood organization called the Nahia Foundation initiated the Nahia Garbage Project in January, 2012. The idea for the project was an outcome of the upsurge in public participation and civic action that followed the 2011 popular uprising. The project provided much needed garbage collection services at a reasonable price and demonstrated the viability of citizen-led projects in Cairo’s informal areas. Photo Credit: TADAMUN/ Sherif Gaber.

Deepening institutionalized forms of participatory local governance can improve the monitoring of service provision and the efficacy of local development projects, while enriching deliberative democracy by voicing previously marginalized community’s needs.

In India, for example, a small NGO in Rajistan – Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS – Association for the Empowerment of Workers and Peasants) – was at the forefront of strengthening India’s Right to Information Law, demanding that local officials answer their questions about local government budgets, projects, and absentee civil servants, in public meetings in their village and towns. Their use of social audits spread throughout the country, culminating eventually in the Right to

2. CORNWALL 2002.

Information Act (2005), enabling millions of citizens to have access to public records and government documents to hold their government officials accountable and to monitor government expenditure in different public projects.

In many other nations which have experienced a transition from military and securitized rule, we argue it is instructive to look at social movements and initiatives who survived the transition by developing broader participatory institutions in dialogue and engagement with the state. Typically, to overcome protest exhaustion and new political realities in a post-revolutionary situation, citizens must switch from mobilizing *against* the power structure to engaging and cooperating with it, if not joining the government itself. Of course, some examples such as South Africa provide cautionary tales about opposition groups who are rapidly absorbed into the new government, leaving civil society severely depleted.

In Egypt, initiatives must carefully define their agendas and prioritize their solutions to social injustice – a main concern of the revolution in 2011. In Latin America, for example, after the defeat of military regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, movements to promote social justice in the built environment and increased democratization at the local level promoted new understandings of the collective or social right to property; they encouraged the use of cooperative housing and more generally politicized the discourse around urban planning to demand broader citizen deliberation in planning processes. They spearheaded a new approach to urban planning which includes a much more political and redistributive lens rather than a top-down management approach, or a technical and bureaucratic one, common in autocratic regimes.

In Latin America leftist parties and social movements shifted their priorities to the “local.” They promoted participatory development and citizen engagement, and in the process, increased their electoral power and popularity which, of course, was critical in the new electoral environment. Participatory governance promoted the devolution of state power to improve local municipal politics and strengthen new democratic actors in order to hold the new, supposedly more responsive government accountable. In addition, in order to address social justice issues and redress inequality, these initiatives focused on more progressive and equitable land tenure rights, the provision of basic services, public goods, and public spaces, and the “Right to the City.” Grass-roots activism was also essential to weakening clientelist networks, including those within the political parties which had led the transitions and begun resorting to “vote buying” policies in the new electoral climate.³

3. HELLER 2001.

Law-Making Procedures: Via Public Mobilization

In Brazil, civil society and social movements had been unable to dislodge the military and security forces from power even after the democratic transition, yet participatory governance and participatory budgeting broadened their constituencies and popularity and strengthened their hand to fight for the further civilianization of the state down the road.

Democratic forces in Brazil were able to influence a new Constitution which was extremely long and contained several innovative channels for public participation and engagement. Paradoxically, the legislature and the executive were still dominated by rather conservative forces from the military era and the Brazilian military was never held accountable for its human rights abuses. Yet, Article 61, (2), of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution allowed for citizens to propose legislation as long as “at least one percent of Brazilian voters, distributed throughout at least five States, with no less than three tenths of one percent of the voters of each of these States” signed a petition. Through this participatory constitutional process, a coalition gathered 150,000 signatures from all over the country to add the Urban Reform Grassroots Amendment to the Constitution. The fundamental principles of this reform were the “right to the city,” the promotion of the “social function” of the city, urban land reform, as well as democratic and participative management of the city.⁴

Although few constitutions in the Middle East allow for similar popular initiatives, the women’s movement in Morocco and in Iran launched a Million Signature Campaign to Reform Personal Status Law. In Morocco the pressure from the campaign led to some significant reforms. In Iran, activists were less successful. The use of social media campaigns for activism was obviously an important part of the success of the Egyptian Revolution, particularly the “We Are All Khalid Sa’id” Facebook group. These strategies can be utilized again for mass lobbying and petition campaigns to demand more local participation, citizen engagement, and constitutional changes. Coalitions need to focus on broad social justice issues rather than ideological or party affiliation to foster social justice in the built environment and strengthen democratic municipal politics.

In Brazil, after many more years of organizing and lobbying, the National Movement for Urban Reform and other coalitions convinced the government to establish the National Ministry of Cities in 2001 and though underfunded, it provided leadership for even more important policies to improve the urban environment.

4. ZANELLI 2008.

Participatory Budgeting and Municipal Politics: An Innovative Approach

Constitutional activism in Brazil went hand in hand with building large, diverse coalitions of groups and movements who were dedicated to social justice issues in urban and rural areas of the country. Some of those groups had been active in the fight against the military and others continued to promote land rights, public services, racial equality, indigenous rights, or a living wage. The Brazilian case provides evidence that a participatory approach to governance, promoted in a sequential, incremental process, can provide great dividends to urban populations, while simultaneously strengthening national democratic processes.

The idea of participatory budgeting at the municipal level was pioneered in Brazil by the leftist Workers' Party (PT) which eventually elected President Lula in 2002. The model has since spread across Latin America and the globe. The WP increased its electoral strength and regional presence by promoting participatory budgeting throughout the country, at the local municipal level, inviting citizens to join a series of highly organized meetings and workshops to prioritize and fund local needs. In Porto Alegre, Brazil in the late 1980s and 1990s, citizens took over many functions usually reserved for bureaucrats: setting city-wide spending priorities, planning investment, reviewing payrolls, not to mention setting the rules for the participatory budgeting process itself and monitoring its outcomes.

A significant portion of the annual municipal budget (between nine and twenty-one percent of the total) was decided in this way, funding hundreds of projects with a completion rate of nearly 100 percent. By 2004, some 20,000 individuals in the city were attending the first round of meetings, many of them for the first time. A conservative estimate was that ten percent of adults in the city had at one point participated. Participatory budgeting fashions a "language of public responsibility and rights that evolves from their work together."⁵ In general, participatory budgeting has been somewhat successful in devolving power, authority, and financial autonomy to the very local level; improving local service provision, enhancing government responsiveness and public deliberation and increasing state transparency.

Of course, it is not a panacea, but by 2004 at least 200 cities had participatory budgeting in place, and at least half of those municipalities were run by a different party than the one that had launched the initiative. The process has not only led to tighter monitoring of public services and development projects because of the closer scrutiny of these lengthy deliberative bodies, but engaged citizens were often able

5. ZANELLI 2008.

to redirect more national and state resources to the local level as well. At the same time, there was not only a political learning curve of newly active citizens, but growth in the number of collective organizations they established, and new political blood as a new cadre of candidates ran for elective office and leadership positions after their involvement in participatory budgeting.

CONCLUSION: A NEW URBAN AGENDA

While Egyptian citizens may have had high hopes for change after 2011, many of them have found national politics disappointing over the past two years since these remarks were first delivered at a conference in Cairo (CEDEJ). Yet, a variety of urban activists, human rights organizations, civil society organizations, professional architects and planners, as well as local initiatives rooted in communities and neighborhoods continue their struggle to enhance social justice and improve the built environment and urban development. We argue that an urban agenda which prioritizes the following goals, as difficult as they may be, is still urgently needed.

To redistribute power and make the state more responsive and accountable to citizens, citizen protests and strategies should move away from the streets and into the corridors of power; since it is the state and its institutions which still need to respond to the core demands of the 2011 revolution. Often popular complaints are limited in scope to solving an immediate problem: a house doesn't have electricity, the road is in terrible condition, the garbage hasn't been collected in a month, or a home is condemned. These are legitimate problems, but require limited solutions. Rarely does a demand for adequate utility services escalate to demands and a long-term pragmatic strategy to change the nature of service delivery or the distribution of services throughout the city. Demands to save a community from demolition do not escalate into demands to insist on more deliberative, accountable, inclusive, and participatory urban planning in Egypt or rejecting predominant neoliberal economic regime. This is not, in any way, to suggest that Egyptians don't have the capacity to see the connections between discrete problems affecting a few and the root cause or larger context of these problems. Instead, ministerial roles and responsibilities are so opaque and sometimes unclear even to government officials themselves that citizens are sometimes at a loss about which Minister, Ministry, or parastatal to target. The government knows this and tries to maintain its bureaucratic interests, insulate itself from the public, and serve the rulers at the top, continuing their paternalistic and autocratic relationships with their citizens. The government's urban strategy is often one of appeasement or willful ignorance to "illegal" behavior

that leaves citizens' to fend for themselves or pay for private services themselves. Nevertheless, it is state policies and regulations which need transformation so that the state can serve the larger public interest.

Government planners should shift from the current technical, bureaucratic, and management approach to urban planning to a more political approach which routinely insists on public deliberation, review, and input. It is a common practice among planners around the world to eschew politics by relying exclusively on "rational" solutions derived from statistics, measurements, and models. Involving citizens in the planning process can be difficult and more complicated for them. This is not to suggest that there is no place in planning for the rational approach – data is powerful and the Egyptian government should do all they can to improve their data collection efforts – but a vision for a city or neighborhood that derives from the people who live there will not only be more democratic, but will likely be more successful.

Government policy should also be radically redirected to strengthen *in situ* development and recognize the assets of diverse communities, including informal housing areas. The Egyptian government has spent billions of Egyptian pounds building dozens of new cities over the past several decades and as part of the National Strategic Plan for urban development, plans to build 44 additional cities by 2052. While in theory, building new cities may help alleviate some of the development pressures on Egypt's densest urban areas, in practice, existing urban areas do not receive the attention and investment they require to maintain their vitality and the new city projects always fall short of their projected goals.

In order to achieve some of these new policies, citizens need to build cross-cutting coalitions around social justice issues to demand change that will benefit the general public rather than an exclusive segment of the population. Social movements around the world have demonstrated the effectiveness of coalitions and activist networks. There are hundreds of organizations working in Egypt on a multitude of social justice issues, from human rights to environmental sustainability. Yet building stronger coalitions around common issues has been more elusive. For example, the right to information is an issue that a large majority of the population, including environmentalists, the media, historians, and public health activists can support. Yet, minority elite deny Egyptians the right to information in "the public interest." Another example is public transportation. Investment in public transportation stands to benefit both commuters and businesses, increase accessibility of public services to a greater proportion of the population, help integrate peri-urban areas of Cairo more tightly into the regional economy, alleviate traffic congestion, reduce pollution, and bolster the value of real-estate. Instead a greater proportion of the state transportation budget

is invested in highways which stand to benefit private car owners – a distinct minority in Egypt. These are just two examples of social justice issues around which organizations might collaborate, but the possibilities are endless.

Given the challenge of changing the government bureaucracy or policymaking, coalitions must be as broad as possible and enlist a range of civil society groups, the professional class, the labor movement, residents groups, industrialists, and businesspersons, artists, actors, the media, and reformist, “internal allies” within the government to succeed.

Much of the instability in Egypt’s urban areas stems from the fact that people do not have the political space to express their needs to the government. Without this space, citizens take to the streets in protest. Despite recent skepticism over electoral democracy, the repressive turn since the summer of 2013, and the re-assertion of the armed forces in Egyptian politics, Egypt still needs a working, representative legislature and the deepening of democracy. One way to open these channels of communication between citizens and the government is to reform local government to provide more democratic power for elected councils, broaden their responsibilities and autonomy, and ensure that public resources are shared at all levels of government, not only the central one in Cairo. It may be true that many local government officials do not have the technical or administrative skills to govern effectively and there will be considerable debate about devolving responsibilities to the local level in Egypt. Thus, any reform efforts must be accompanied by a serious and sustained commitment from officials at the highest level of government in the form of a government capacity building program to train local officials. Without democratization of what is now called “local administration” Egyptians will not have the tools and rights to solve their problems locally and deliberate about their future. Given the remarkable ability of Egyptians to mobilize around political claims, the true risk is not in reform, but in maintaining the status quo.

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