Rural Revolutionaries: Political Mobilisation of Farmers and Fishermen in the Egyptian Countryside after the 25th of January Uprising

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Abstract:

Before the uprising in Egypt in 2011, violence had persisted in the Egyptian countryside. The violence stemmed from the reorganisation of land ownership and access to state support that followed the economic reforms. The reforms are not limited to agriculture, but extend to the whole rural sector as the fishing industry illustrate. The neoliberal ideology of these reforms obfuscates the social impact, which entails rising inequality in access to land and lake. Both farmers and fishermen are aware of the shortcomings of the current system, and they draw on the past when formulating alternatives. In making these demands, farmers are connecting social and economic failures to political decisions, illustrating a spreading political awareness. A related development is the rapid dissemination of labour syndicates in the countryside. In Egypt’s corporatist state, these independent unions express the politicisation that has transpired since the uprising began.

Note on transliteration

In the following text, Arabic words have been transliterated according to the simplified standard set forth by the International Journal of Middle East Studies. This means that where diacritical marks are mostly omitted, except for technical terms. Words with accepted English spellings, commonly names of people and places, are rendered accordingly. Other names are rendered in simplified transliteration, without the diacritical marks. Finally, for sake of clarity, titles of books and newspaper articles are rendered with the diacritical marks in the footnotes and the bibliography. So are the transliterated names of organisations when they appear in the footnotes.
Farmers and fishermen have mobilised after the uprising on the 25th of January 2011 to participate in their communities and protest the shortcomings of the local and central government apparatus. They seek to improve the social and economic conditions in the countryside, and in particular the conditions relating to their work. I argue that this mobilisation is also political, because they have taken conscious steps to engage and reinsert themselves into the political field of rural development. My contribution is firstly to assess the political situation of farmers and fishermen based on the social and economic structures in the countryside. Secondly I analyse their actions to influence the Egyptian body politic.

The argument is based on fieldwork in Egypt including interviews between October and December 2012 combined with secondary sources. I visited three different villages where I interviewed ten farmers and seven fishermen, in addition to numerous conversations with the villagers. I also interviewed two farmers connected to the Land Centre for Human Rights and one lawyer from the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights.

Prior to the 25th of January uprising, political violence was a persistent feature of the Egyptian countryside. Here I discuss the impact of the uprising on the conflicts causing that violence. I begin with the complaints of farmers and fishermen, which centre on increased hardship and impoverishment. I connect these complaints with the reforms in the agricultural sector the government implemented in the late eighties and nineties. I then situate the farmers and fishermen’s demands within the agricultural system and the parastatal institutions that have historically organised the agricultural sector. Finally I discuss the diffusion of trade unions as a continuation of the political struggles, and participation of farmers and fishermen as a conscious choice grounded in an emerging awareness.

**Farmer protests: informal protests and rural violence**

Violence has been a consistent feature of the Egyptian countryside. In both 2009 and 2010 more than a hundred deaths and over a thousand injuries and arrests took place. The underlying cause is an ongoing restructuring of the social relations in the countryside. It is perhaps best exemplified in a law passed in 1992 and implemented in October 1997. Law 96 of 1992 removed the security of tenancy enabling landowners to force tenant farmers off their land. Violent clashes have occurred in both the valley and the delta as a direct result of the law. Figures from the Land Centre for Human Rights (LCHR) show high levels of violence and oppression immediately after the law’s implementation.

The violence is a symptom of an ongoing process of transferring rights to land. An event that took place in the village of Kamshish, in September 1998, are typical rather than unique. They are also highly symbolic as Kamshish is the historical epicentre of the farmers’ struggle in Egypt. Relatives of the Fiqi-family – the historical landowning family in the village – returned in September 1998 to reclaim lands given to the farmers under the agrarian reform laws of Nasser. Security police clearly colluded with the Fiqi-family and its private security as they sought to take control over land the family claimed in contravention of the agrarian reform laws. A press release details the events as follows: First the Fiqi-family tried to threaten and intimidate the farmers, and then they hired thugs who sabotaged the irrigation canals and tore down animal shelters before starting to fire on people. It was only after that, that the farmers gathered and chased the thugs off, as well as taking some captives. Members of the Fiqi family then went to the police station where they were able to coax them into arresting the farmers. 16 villagers were arrested and later charged with stealing weapons and money, before they were eventually released. The press release also mentions that the Fiqi-family did not have legal title to the land in question. The land was subject to a legal decision and a caretaker had been appointed at the time of the clashes.

Farmers’ protests are not new in Egypt, nor are they limited to the kind of reaction illustrated above. Both Sayyid ‘Ashmawi and Nathan Brown traces the history of farmer protests in Egypt back to the late 19th century. Farmers protested in a wide variety of ways, from petitions and lawsuits to sit-ins, roadblocks and cutting telegraph lines to violent clashes and outright criminal acts like sabotage. The range, variety and localness of many of these events, renders it difficult to gauge their full extent. So does the lack of formal organisation and, in some of the cases, the lack of expressed political goals. After the 25th of January uprising, farmers have again engaged actively in sit-ins and demonstrations. Simultaneously acts of blocking roads and railways, and even burning cotton harvests, continue. There are innovative ways of demonstrating as well, like the inhabitants of al-Tahsin in al-Daqahliyya governorate who declared the village “administratively autonomous.”
The protests continue because the oppression continues. Also after the revolution there has been examples of farmers being dispossessed of their land. One example that has received some attention is the farmers of Madinat Al-Sadat on the desert highway between Cairo and Alexandria. After relocating there after losing their lands, they now face a second threat of eviction; the Ministry of Housing wants the land for shopping malls and golf courses. In al-Fayyum irrigation water has been prevented from reaching the lands of small farmers by neglectful maintenance by the irrigation authorities. Simultaneously, wealthy landowners have been able to use their influence to avoid these problems. Struggles over land and irrigation continue in al-Fayyum also after the uprising.

An agricultural policy of dispossession

"Farmers have always been under the heel, and they are still under the heel." This is how one informant expressed that farmers feel they cannot make ends meet in their daily lives. Another farmer linked the difficult position with the economic conditions in the market; that the prices for agricultural produce were sinking while input prices were rising. He had tried to sell vegetables worth 600 Egyptian pounds with respect to inputs like fertiliser and labour, but the merchant only offered 500 pounds. A farmer and the local leader of a trade union branch in the village gave a similar example for cotton: To grow and harvest one faddān of cotton required 3-4000 pounds in inputs like fertiliser and pesticides, and an additional 5000 in labour costs. With the current prices the harvest would be worth around 7000 pounds.

These examples all show how farmers are under pressure economically. There is no doubt that there is a general trend of impoverishment in rural Egypt, which relates to the market reforms that began in the eighties. Reem Saad shows the debilitating effects on poorer rural household of the strategies used to counter the loss of income. Families are forced to change diets, sell household assets, compromise on social standing, and take children out of school to labour. Or they become dependent on loans and charity. Saad specifically discusses the difficult situation of tenant farmers after the implementation of Law 96. An estimated one million tenants, accounting for 10 percent of Egypt’s population when their family members are included, were affected by sharp rises in land prices and rents – up to 400 percent – when the law was took effect in 1997. A tenant farmer who does not own any land, but rents seven qarārīṭ, explained a similar predicament: “when I don’t work on the fields, I work as a day labourer for the fishermen. Doing that I earn five Egyptian pounds a day, and that covers the expenses for breakfast for my family; what do I do for dinner?”

The economic reforms in the agricultural sector consisted of two interlinked parts. On the one hand, reforms were to withdraw the state from interfering in an agricultural market. These reforms consisted of ending the monopoly of the state in production and supply of farming inputs like fertiliser, seeds and pesticides, while also ending crop allocation controls, delivery quotas of staple crops and price controls. Previously the state organised the agricultural sector through two institutions, the village banks under the Principal Bank for Development and Agricultural Investment (PBDAC) and the agricultural cooperative societies. Through them the state provided subsidised inputs like fertiliser in return for parts of the harvest on selected crops. After removing these restrictions in the late eighties and early nineties, the idea was that a free market would govern the agricultural sector.

On the other hand, agriculture was not left completely to the market forces. It was still subject to state intervention since the liberalising reforms were coupled with a strategy of export led growth, meaning that Egypt was supposed to export horticultural produce – high value fruits and vegetables, and cut flowers – to Europe and the Gulf. Behind the strategy is the assumption that agricultural growth would follow the establishment of Egyptian horticultural exports under the auspices of big agro-business firms. The necessities of this strategy do not exist, however. Egypt lacks both the infrastructure and the knowledge necessary to compete effectively in a very competitive international market. Additionally the connections between the business elites, the bureaucrats, and the political leadership that determine investment incentives make agribusiness much less profitable compared to real estate and construction.

Nevertheless growth in agricultural production after the reforms are often cited as evidence of their success although the production growth could also indicate a return to subsistence production as Timothy Mitchell argues. The production increases occurred mostly in staple foods like wheat and rice. After removing the crop allocations for cotton and sugar cane, the primary cash crops of Lower and Upper Egypt respectively, farmers overwhelmingly switched to increased...
production of wheat and rice. At the same time the total area planted with cash crops like cotton and common vegetables like tomatoes and potatoes declined. The switch to staple crops suggests increased production for the households, not the markets. Furthermore, the gross worth of Egyptian agricultural exports declined sharply after the reforms. In all, farmers became more isolated from the markets because of the reforms; not more involved.

That farmers are forced to rely on household production is also a sign of difficult conditions. Dismantling of the village banks and the cooperative societies have changed the framework for agriculture, and brought economic and social insecurity. Thus a recurring complaint was precisely on the failure of the cooperatives to fulfill their perceived obligations. A study carried out in Qina and Aswan governorates found that farmers, and particularly small farmers, still saw the cooperatives as the legitimate provider of farming inputs. The study also found that only larger landholders were likely to have the financial and logistical capabilities to access and benefit from the private sector.

In Malak Rouchdy’s account of the village of Batra, the story of the farmer and merchant Hag Latif Nigma illustrates the interplay between market and village. Hag Latif Nigma was able to take advantage of the agrarian reforms to buy a plot of land from the Fakhri family, the biggest landowners in the village. During the seventies he managed to monopolise the marketing of the Fakhri family’s harvests, and used the profits to buy additional land in the village. Hag Latif Nigma eventually became one of the largest field merchants in his village, and many small farmers depended on him for social and financial support; the Nigma family had become one of the most influential families in the village. Feeling Nigma’s influence on the farm where he had cultivated ties with many of the workers, the Fakhri-family decided to sell their crops to a state company and end Nigma’s monopoly. The switch in the Fakhri family’s strategy was a direct response to a challenge to their authority on the farm. However, they could do this because they had the financial and logistical wherewithal to find an alternative marketing outlook for the crops as well as compromise on the price. The smaller farmers lack such resources, thus for them the market is not opportunity but dependence on Hag Latif Nigma.

Another example of the biased effects of the market reforms is the market in fertilisers. After the uprising in 2011, there has been an ongoing “crisis of fertiliser” with spiralling prices and diminishing supply. All my informants complained about the lack of adequate supplies in the cooperatives, and said they were forced to buy in “the black market.” The designation of the market as “the black market” illustrates how the cooperatives are still viewed as the legitimate input supplier. Additionally it points to the illegitimate roots of the market. The farmers’ biggest concern was the price difference between the cooperative and market. For instance fertiliser costs twice as much in the market, 150 pounds a bag as opposed to 75 pound in the cooperative, according to some of my informants. In the peak season in the fall of 2012 (and again in 2013), prices went even higher, reaching 180 pounds a bag.

There are several reasons for the price increases. Locally, the informants told me of different strategies corrupt board members and clerks in the cooperatives used to take advantage of the strategies. One example is selling the fertiliser to merchants, for them to resell at a profit. Sometimes they replaced the fertiliser sold to the private sector with outdated and old fertiliser bought cheaply from those same merchants. Yet these strategies are possible because of the underlying, structural problem in the fertiliser market. For many years there has been a functioning oligopoly controlling the prices and the inputs in the sector, caused by the specific way that the privatisation program in the nineties was carried out.

Fertiliser had been one of the old industries that benefitted from protective measures taken under Nasser’s program of import substitution industrialisation. The state built and operated factories tasked with supplying the farmers in Egypt with fertiliser. The government also distributed farming inputs and controlled prices through the cooperatives. As the controls on agriculture were removed, so was control over production and supply of fertiliser. In other words, the government tightly controlled the chain from production to supply. This was the background to the liberalising reforms in the nineties where the private sector was allowed to import (and export) fertiliser and the state owned factories were sold off. However, the buyers of the fertiliser factories were not from the private sector, but rather a conglomerate of government entities that used their connections to maintain the oligopoly in the market, as well as starting to export fertiliser. As a result the prices of fertiliser quadrupled. The government was forced to reassume price controls. With the higher world market prices and limited storage capacity, diminishing supply are forcing prices up in peak times of the agricultural season nonetheless. Small farmers are paying the price of the reforms.
Fishermen without a lake

The fishermen I spoke to made similar complaints as the farmers. The same neoliberal ideology is evident within the fishing industry. One example is the official promulgation of aquaculture in the shallow North-Delta lakes by the Government of Egypt and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) alike. Whereas agricultural land is under pressure from expanding cities and speculation, the lakes have historically been under pressure by land reclamation projects. For example large parts of the Southwestern Lake Burullus were drained in the eighties and nineties. There are ecological features of the lakes that make them very susceptible to land reclamation, and cheap compared to land reclamation in the desert. The lakes are generally very shallow; the maximum depth of Burullus for instance is only two meters. Thus damming and draining parts are very easy, and the land is very fertile. Similar projects were undertaken around Lake Idku and Lake Manzala. In the village in Kafr al-Shaykh, the land reclamation projects on Lake Burullus still prompted heated debates between the farmers and the fishermen. The fishermen lamented the loss of the lake, which meant that more fishermen had to share a smaller lake. The farmers responded by asking rhetorically: “where should we be if not here?”

Starting in the late eighties, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the IMF and the Ministry of Agriculture have vocally promoted the development of aquaculture in these shallow lakes. The IMF and the government are promoting a modern version of fish farms suited to the mass production of fish. The three easternmost lakes, Idku, Burullus and Manzala, are all objects of enclosure, limiting the access of fishermen to the lake and depleting the resources. This is in addition to other serious problems of pollution, overfishing, corrupt and negligent government control, and sea level rise. These factors combine to create a diverse set of challenges for the fishing industry. Aquaculture is nonetheless the best illustration of the similarities between the agricultural and fishing sectors.

Modern aquaculture focuses on intensive production of fish relying on the lakes for fish fry. The methods pile pressure on an already fragile ecosystem. It is easy to build fish farms by closing off water in square basins wherein the fish is raised. The industry, which according to IMF reports produces impressive yields, frequently seize far more of the lake than they are permitted to. In the first year after the revolution, one fisherman and union leader estimated the total area in Lake Burullus encroached upon in this manner to 30,000 faddān. Prior to the revolution 130 fish farms had seized 18,000 faddān, despite having permission only for 3000. This is an old but continuing problem in these lakes, especially as Article 48 of the Fisheries Law 124 of 1983 actually prohibits the establishment of fish farms in lake waters. The net result is that what was previously a common area shared and enjoyed by different villages according to established conventions, is increasingly closed off. As shorelines are privatised, access to the remaining commons are also becoming restricted.

Fish farms are a development success insofar as they produce high yields and contribute a significant part of the fish harvest. Therefore, both the government and the development agencies have incentives to continue to promote the industry. The fish farms are also very profitable. Both farmers and fisherman report that they are so lucrative that reclaimed land is now being turned back into “lake” meaning fish farms. The profit margins are helped by the industry’s ability to externalise certain costs. For one the fish fry, zarī’a, are harvested from the lake. Hence the industry avoids the need for hatcheries, which are complex and costly, to supply the fish. The demand exceeds the natural supply in the lake, however, and fishermen reported that the aquaculture industry has drastically depleted the stocks of fish in the lake. Another example is the dumping of wastewater into the lake. The fishermen are acutely aware of the deteriorating conditions. When I asked about the future prospects of fishing, one fisherman answered: “in fifty years […] there will be no fishermen; there will be no fish.” He could well have added that there might not be a lake either.

The social foundations of the rural political economy

Serious threats to their livelihoods characterise the conditions of both farmers and fishermen. As discussed above, their experiences are a result of the lack of representation for farmers and fishermen in the rural political process. At the same time, the interests that benefit from the current policies in the agricultural and fishing sectors correspond with those of groups with access to power and wealth. In other words, there are important social forces behind the politics of dispossession. External pressure from international institutions like USAID and IMF, which promoted the neoliberal development orthodoxy, intersected with a regime ever more wedded to the economic
elite of the country, and whose social and economic interests the regime increasingly identified with. In the agricultural sector, this link is personified in the former minister of agriculture, Yusif Wali, of an old landowning family in al-Fayyum. This in turn reflected the social base of the regime itself. Since the seventies and even in the late sixties, the military regime followed a strategy of retraditionalisation in order to consolidate its power. In rural areas this strategy manifested as an alliance between the regime and local notables and wealthy farmers.

The results of the agricultural reforms draw attention to the relationship between rural elites and the state apparatus. As a result of Law 96 alone, it was estimated that 432,000 tenant farmers (out of a total of 905,000) lost their access to land. Only 1.5 percent of those affected were actually compensated with land in the reclaimed lands, which the government had promised to do when it implemented the laws. The land that tenants lost in this way overwhelmingly went to landlords. As such it continued a long trend in Egyptian agriculture. Prior to the reforms, approximately 900,000 faddān had shifted (back) from the hands of tenant farmers to landowners since the agrarian reforms redistributed lands in the fifties and sixties.

Springborg traces this trend to the seventies, when holdings of ten faddān or above were starting to expand, recovering from the impact of the agrarian reforms. Smaller holdings on the other hand became more numerous, but failed to expand. Thus more farmers had to divide less land. In other words, already the Sadat era was “characterised by increasing inequality of access to land.”

The beneficiaries at that time were particularly the rural middle and upper classes. Waterbury has specified them to be those with landownership of ten to fifty faddān. Their ownerships were untouched by the successive agrarian reform laws. With their economic power intact and with the economic power of the upper stratum of landowners challenged, this segment could be expected to take over power locally.

Hamied Ansari, based on the investigations of the Higher Committee for the Liquidation of Feudalism (HCLF), finds that the upper stratum of influential landowners after the revolution and the agrarian reforms continued to exert influence over high levels in local government and the party despite tight screening procedures imposed on the selection of key party officials. At the local levels, the families that traditionally controlled the ‘umda post continued to enjoy unmitigated influence in the local communities. The evidence collected by the HCLF further points to the manner in which the upper stratum families divided their holding among the family members, so that no member owned more than the legal limit. In this way they circumvented the legislation, which assumed that the nuclear family was the foundation of ownership. By activating extended family networks, the large landowners maintained control over land, and thus economic and political power. Political control during Nasser was based on the administrative apparatus of the government and of the (single) party. And the HCLF found that the social hierarchy among the rural elites were in fact replicated in those organisational hierarchies with political influence extending all the way to the urban centre of power. The landowning families re-emerged after the defeat in June 1967, exemplified in the appointment of Sayyid Mar'i as minister of agriculture. He was himself from an old landowning family, but one of many to hold influential positions after the June War. Under Sadat, he began to reverse the agrarian reforms that he had also helped engineer in the fifties. The restoration of the rural elites was immediate; for instance thirteen of the families investigated by the HCLF had members elected to the 1969 National Assembly.

Locally, next to the political institutions associated with the government and the party, both the agricultural cooperative societies and the village banks formed the base of landowners’ control. This role for the rural elite became more pronounced with the regime’s lack of interests in the “penetration of mass society” under Sadat and Mubarak. The cooperatives offered the control of considerable farming inputs and access to credit – prior to 1976 when they were temporarily abolished and replaced by the village banks. For example several of the families investigated by the HCLF had members placed as directors, accountants or board members.

By 1969 the domination became even more regularised through legislation. Prior to Law 51 of 1969, a land ownership ceiling of five faddān applied to eighty percent of the board seats. The law raised it to ten, and made literacy a condition for board members. The latter change outright excluded many small farmers from participating in elections. The village notables have since controlled the cooperatives, though they often did so before as well through intermediaries. Abdel Aal finds that in 1995 there was still a “clear reflection of the village power structure in the mem
bership of the cooperative board” in some villages in Qina and Aswan, but it likely is the same all over.\textsuperscript{52} An informant put it this way: “there is still a structure but it has no role [for the farmers].”\textsuperscript{53} Thus farmers often ignore the cooperative boards, accusing board members and officials of being corrupt.\textsuperscript{54}

Another example of the entrenched position of the social and economic hierarchy within public institutions is the village banks under the authority of the PBDAC. During the seventies and eighties it overtook the role of the cooperative as parastatal institution tasked with providing credits to farmers, to become a regular bank, only owned by the government. The PBDAC charges interest rates upward of twelve to fifteen percent making loans prohibitively expensive for the farmers provided they are able to access them.\textsuperscript{55} Access is intimately tied to the patronage networks within the Egyptian civil service, tying the rural elites together with the centre.\textsuperscript{56} For farmers with small land holdings, access to cash and credit is hence very limited. This limitation hampers their ability to invest or manage the land sustainably. Yet the limited opportunity for poor farmers to invest was one of the arguments for neoliberal reforms; that is, for dispossessing them of their land instead of reforming the institutions that provide credit.\textsuperscript{57} So although agriculture is highlighted as a growth sector within the economy, little or no consideration has been given to opinions and needs of the farmers.

Again the experiences of the fishermen offer a converging example. They spoke about how the government not only promoted the fish farms, but also were the owners. They said it was not possible to petition the government to do anything, as the perpetrators were the same as those tasked with protecting the lake. One fisherman said straightforwardly when I asked him who owns the fish farms: “They [the owners] are the government.”\textsuperscript{58} The fishermen told a similar story about the reclaimed lands: The government told they would offer shares of the reclaimed lands below market prices to the fishermen through the fishermen’s society as compensation. However, officers, judges and bureaucrats had bought those shares only to resell the land later at market value, making huge profits. This story corresponds with the earlier findings of Ray Bush and Amal Sabri on the situation of Lake Manzala, where a “Manzala mafia” comprised of “government officials, bureaucrats and local elites” controlled the fish farms.\textsuperscript{59} Fish farms enable the transfer of the surpluses of the lakes from the commons to the private sector dominated by those with connections to the elite.

Ray Bush has interpreted the agricultural policies pursued under the reform agenda as an “agricultural strategy without farmers.” That strategy follows logically from the agricultural politics without farmers and fishermen. In the sixties, elements within the regime flirted with mass mobilisation and an “agricultural” revolution, but the conservative elements of the regime won, helped by the defeat in the June War. The economic reforms of the eighties and nineties have also caused an estimated loss of over 700 000 jobs in the countryside altogether, and conditions have become much worse for the farmers.\textsuperscript{60} The reason lies in the political structure. The regime has relied on the upper class in the countryside, protecting the economic interests in return for political support and guarantees of social quiescence.

**Mursi and the farmers’ demands**

The situation described above has continued after the 25\textsuperscript{th} of January uprising as well. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) did not address the situation in the countryside, and the regime of Muhammad Mursi failed to understand it. In his brief tenure he largely refrained from addressing the situation, in contrast to the Free Officers after the coup d’état of 1952. The circumstances of Mursi are different, and in Mursi’s defence he was a beleaguered president. Yet on the occasion when he did address the farmers, his approach demonstrated his shortcomings.

Egypt celebrates ʿīd al-fallāḥ every year on the ninth of September to commemorate the signing of the first agrarian reform law by the Free Officers. On the sixtieth anniversary of this law in 2012, the newly elected Mursi announced some initiatives from the state to better the situation of the farmers. First, farmers who owed money to the PBDAC would have the debts cancelled if the amount owed was less than 10,000 pounds. It is estimated that this would affect a total of 44,000 farmers. The role of the PBDAC as a part of a structure of patronage, however, means that farmers with loans are largely those with access through connections and networks. Furthermore, a significant portion of the loans is non-performing, which is expected when the system is managed under the logic of patronage. My informants expressed reservation about the move, as it either did not affect them or they did not think the measure could be implemented.\textsuperscript{61}
Second, Mursi announced that the state’s official price of rice would increase roughly ten percent, from around 1800, which was current market prices, to 2000 pounds a ton. The state would also forgive fines imposed on farmers for growing rice in excess of the quotas. Mitchell points out that with the easing of the restrictions on rice growing following the reforms, farmers had grown so much that the government was forced to re-impose quotas, and issue fines for transgressions, in order to save water. In 1996 the farmers grew rice in an area of 1.2 million faddān, 300,000 more than stipulated. In 2011, this number had increased even more, with rice grown “illegally” on 500,000 faddān. Of course, farmers would face double fines, Mursi warned, if they were caught growing excess rice after the pardon.

The price increase was in response to the low prices of rice at the time. Just after the harvest, the price of rice was reported to be around 1800 pounds per ton, as the new harvest came simultaneously with an export ban in effect since 2008. Just the year before the rice price hit new highs as domestic demand had surged ahead of Ramadan. The increase in “illegal” rice growing in other words comes despite, not because of, fluctuations in the price of rice. The increases after the reforms in the nineties similarly came in the face of decreasing prices, which suggests that rice is grown primarily for household consumption rather than the market. So when Mursi increases the price of rice, he also helps those farmers who grow for the market, but fail to reach the subsistence sector.

Mursi’s opposition almost immediately started to criticise the decision, but without managing any better in terms of an alternative. The wafdist opposition was a case in point. Al-Wafd, the party’s newspaper published an article under the heading “Mursi deceives the farmers.” There, the point of the criticism was not its failure to reach small farmers and landless, but rather that it increased the financial burden on the state. Hence, neither Mursi nor the opposition manage to question the dominant neoliberal assumptions of Egyptian agriculture. Mursi attempted to adjust the market by effectively setting a price floor. Al-Wafd favoured an even more laissez-faire approach. Neither questions the applicability of the market as such to the agricultural sector.

Farmers on the other hand highlight other challenges than just low prices – although this is an important part of what they describe as problematic. My informants called repeatedly for rehabilitating the agricultural cooperatives and social rights to deal with the insecurity they are exposed to. One farmer put it like this: “All I want is that when we are ill or injured, we can go to the hospital and they treat me.” Other farmers echoed similar lines of thought. The head of the village branch of a trade union emphasised health services, pensions, an end to the black market and a reform of the cooperatives. The fishermen present similar demands. A local fishermen’s syndicate made a list of eleven changes, whereof seven pertain directly to the conditions in the lake. These demands include stopping transgressions and remove existing irregularities, ending the exploitation of the fish fry, using motorboats, and unlawful fishing. The syndicate’s other demands concerned social security: liveable pensions and access to health services. The only political demand was a wish for a minister of fishing. As of now, the state agency responsible for fishing is administered under the Ministry of Agriculture. The fishermen, like the farmers, feel excluded from the political processes.

The demands made by farmers and fishermen can be interpreted as claiming benefits they have had, and later lost. In terms of social security, the concrete actions reflect rights they enjoyed under Nasser’s social contract. The other demands focused on controlling the market and protecting the farmers using the same methods as the Free Officers: a cooperative movement and price controls. In my interviews, the personal popularity of Nasser was evident. The informants did not condone the Nasserist regime, but he still had the benefit of the doubt. The feeling was that he was one of the people and therefore he had known what had to be done. One informant made his point by contrasting Nasser with Mursi: the latter had done nothing, while the former required six weeks to implement the agrarian reforms. In other words, Nasser’s popularity (and Mursi’s lack of appeal at the time) reflects the difference between redistributing land to the poor and forgiving a few farmers’ debts.

Both the agrarian reforms and the agricultural system had ulterior motives behind their implementation. The regime implemented the agrarian reforms in order to break the power of the landowning classes, the political backbone of the monarchy. Through the cooperative societies (and in conjunction with the single party) the regime sought to mobilise the farmers in order to expropriate the surplus of the agricultural production in order to finance the industrialisation. Through the cooperatives the regime regulated the agricultural sector. This strategy put the small
farmers at the centre of the agricultural politics by making smallholdings the aim of the reforms. The cooperatives were thus also meant to benefit this group, and as such Nasser’s agricultural system represents an alternative to the current system.

The farmers draw upon it to challenge the agricultural reforms that displaced the farmers in the articulation of agricultural policies. Farmers in al-Qalyubiyya for example had established an alternative agriculture cooperative in 2005 to overcome the unfavourable market conditions. They organised it by enlisting relatives, friends, and neighbours. Other than that, it had been modelled on the state cooperative: the farmers paid an annual membership fee and in return could buy seeds and fertiliser there. The informants agreed that the cooperative had been successful initially, obtaining favourable prices by buying larger quantities. Now they claimed it had turned into a shop, selling non-agricultural wares like “refrigerators and washing machines.”

Members had become disenchanted and no longer paid their fees.

The cooperatives alleviated many of the difficulties that small and middle farmers currently face in the market. However, by appealing to that system, the farmers do not challenge the developmentalist ideology that dictates agricultural policy. Nasser’s strategy simultaneously included the farmers in a developmentalist ideology that championed economic growth as the measure of successful development. In the neoliberal age, economic growth remains as the measure, and hence goal, of development. Thus the farmers are largely unable to question a structure of power that excludes the farmers – and the fishermen – from influencing the political decisions that affect their livelihoods.

Trappings of power: Farmers’ unions and the state

The most manifest movement in the countryside after the uprising has been the dissemination of trade unions for farmers and fishermen. Independent trade unions have become a prominent dimension of political mobilisation in all of Egypt after former Minister of Labour Power, Ahmad al-Bura‘i, released the “Declaration on Trade Union Freedom” on the 12th of March 2011. The host of farmers’ unions that appeared after the revolution highlight some lasting challenges to political mass mobilisation through the divisions that political, social and economic factors cause. These disagreements obstruct cooperation around what are essentially similar goals, even at village level. Nevertheless they simultaneously represent a significant political reordering.

Kamshish (again) caught the spirit of the times. On the 30th of April 2011, the anniversary of Salah Husayn’s murder, a group of farmers announced the formation of the Union of Egyptian Farmers. The union is linked to the left-wing Tajammu’ Party. The historical reasons for this relation trace back to the socialist ideology that came to dominate the struggle against the Fiqi family in the fifties and sixties. The Union had been underway since an assembly of 316 farmers from fifteen governorates gathered in Kamshish in 1983, but state security had obstructed the registration. After the uprising, the union had finally been vindicated.

Attending the celebrations in Kamshish after the announcement were several other farmers-cum-political activist like Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qadir, founder and former leader of the General Syndicate of Farmers (GSF). He had been trying to establish this syndicate since 1996, but met only with scorn: “I went to Mr. Safwat al-Sharif in 1996 and he ripped up the application and threw it in my face. After that I went to Mrs. A’isha Abd al-Hadi, the minister of labour, but she mocked me and said ‘it would be better for you to electocute yourself.’” Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qadir’s experience, alongside that of the Kamshish farmers, illustrate the difficulties of establishing independent organisations under the old regime.

However, it is not automatic that registration means success; more than forty different farmers’ associations have appeared after the uprising. I found two of them in the village in Kafr al-Shaykh, including a local branch of ‘Abd al-Qadir’s GSF. The local leader had worked since the spring of 2011 in order to establish it. He had heard that a friend of his had set up a branch in the governorate of Kafr al-Shaykh. He then contacted this friend and proceeded to establish a local unit of the trade union through mobilising his network: “When I sought to establish the syndicate [branch], I told my friends and acquaintances that were farmers, I made pamphlets and posters and distributed and I announced the syndicate from the mosque.” He claimed that by October 2012, the union had 74 members, out of approximately 2000 farmers in the village, and that it was steadily increasing. A year and a half after starting to recruit members for the local branch, he still considered it to be in the “stage of establishment.”
There was another farmer syndicate active in the area called the General Syndicate of Egypt’s Farmers (GSEF). This created considerable confusion for many farmers. An old farmer, for example, said he was a member of both syndicates. He knew the local GSF leader and stressed that he was a member. The two membership cards he showed were, however, both issued by GSEF. The two men that recruited him had come while he was working in the field. They had asked all the peasants in the area to join their union, the GSEF. He had thought at the time that it was a good idea, so he had paid the thirty EGP fee to become a member. By December he was dissatisfied with the unions and he had decided he did not wish to renew his membership. He said it was because "nothing had happened." Other farmers were not members at all. The neighbour for example, a middle-aged farmer, had refused to join the syndicate. He said it was because he did not think they would be able to change anything.

The two different trade unions at work in the village are competing organisations. The GSF branch leader explained that they were rivals because they are tied to different political forces. Thus the slight difference in name disguised real differences in political affiliation. Both the branch leader and another farmer accused the GSEF of being a tool for the Muslim Brotherhood. According to them, the Brotherhood had established the syndicate because they failed to take control over the GSF after the revolution. The branch leader on the other hand claimed that GSF was politically "independent."

There are links between the GSEF and the Muslim Brotherhood that lend some credibility to the accusations. The chairman, ‘Abd al-Rahman Shukri, was an elected member of the post-revolutionary parliament for the Freedom and Justice Party and seemingly the preferred farmer representative of the Mursi government. He was for instance the farmer candidate on a committee of top government officials tasked with solving the farmers’ problems. In a newspaper interview he also acknowledges the backing the Muslim Brotherhood and the party have given to the syndicate, but he denies that all members are in fact members of the Brotherhood as well.

The political affiliation and reliance on close ties with a political force is common. The GSF for its part seems linked to the older establishment of farmers’ associations and in particular the agriculture cooperative union. Locally the syndicate seems tied to the rural notability and better-off farmers, the groups that came to dominate the agricultural cooperative societies and village banks since their establishment. The branch leader in the village pointed out on one occasion: “We don’t want to align the syndicate with any political group or movement... we care only for our goal: concern for the farmers’ conditions.” Nevertheless, the leader had met his contacts in the syndicate through a position in the agricultural cooperative where he had previously sat on the board. He claimed that the other board members had prevented him from being re-elected after a feud with them, because they realised he wanted to defend farmers’ rights, while they wanted the corruption to continue. Nevertheless, and without implying that they are not sincere in their work, GSF seems to be tied to this network of the rural establishment.

There are other signs to suggest that the links between this syndicate and the old agricultural establishment are more than coincidence. One activist I interviewed straightforwardly called it a “governmental” trade union. More than that however, it seems that he is the preferred candidate of the interim government currently in power, as his appointment as the farmer representative to the fifty-member constitutional review committee suggests. There are also allegations of corruption between the GFS’s leader, businessmen and the government agency responsible for land in Wadi Natrun. The syndicate has been offering its members the opportunity to buy plots of reclaimed land in Wadi al-Natrun in Buhayra governorate. This land was also advertised in the village in Kafr al-Shaykh in a recruitment campaign. In September the responsible government agency was forced to cancel an auction for more land, after an investigation into the auctions had begun. Hashim Faraj, the general secretary Union of Small Farmers’ Syndicates (USFS), stated that both the agency and the Ministry of Agriculture had appeared to favour the GPS, as other farmers’ associations had been prevented from attending the previous auctions. So even if the GSF is not the official government trade union, it appears to be a part of the rural establishment.

The USFS is another attempt to establish a representative organisation for the farmers. Unlike the other two, this is a union of local farmers’ syndicates, and as such represent an attempt to build from the ground up. The union is based on the network of the LCHR, which have also provided legal and technical assistance to many of the syndicates. The USFS has been active in participating and promoting the farmers troubles by cooperating closely with the centre. One example is the campaign organised in collaboration with the local farmers’ union in Quta Qarun in al-Fayyum.
Farmers there have been lodged in a battle over land rights with the Wali family, relatives of Yusif Wali, the previous minister of agriculture and a driving force behind the agricultural reforms. The family is an old landowning family in the area and it has used the reform process to claim land farmers received under the agrarian reforms. In this case the USFS organises farmers that are already mobilised. Thus it connects with the farmers’ struggle as it has manifested in Egypt over the last decades. By cooperating with the LCHR, the union is able to widen its reach, and to link up with related struggles elsewhere.

The USFS’ way of operating, building bottom-up organisations contrasts with the strategy chosen by the GSF and the GSEF. The latter two have rather connected with political and social networks that afford them influence and positions, but at the cost of mobilising grass root bases. The result is of course that the trade unions themselves will be politicised. One example is the presidential decree that former president Mursi announced on the 22nd of November 2012, in which he claimed immunity from judicial oversight for a limited period. The decree was very controversial at the time and contributed to a resurgence of demonstrations and protests. The GSEF supported the decree, while the GSF condemned it.

It is easy to become trapped by the closeness to power. The state apparatus in Egypt still incline towards the corporatist system established by the military regime. Under this regime, the leaderships of the labour unions often become the voice of government to its members than vice versa. During Mursi’s presidency, the GSEF’s chairman ‘Abd al-Rahman Shukri defended a negligible increase in sugar cane prices, which he justified with “a promise” of better prices to come. Another indication of corporatism is that members become more important as names on membership lists than as participants in the organisation. The old farmer in the village, who said he had heard nothing from the syndicate after they recruited him, is an example. The danger is that by demobilising the members in this way, the power of the organisation itself dwindles. Thus these associations easily become dependent on their patrons in power and ready tools to justify policies rather than address farmers’ grievances.

The corporatism of the Egyptian state can also explain the lack of cooperation between the different organisations. In such a system, there can only be one organisation. Another possible reason is the personal animosity that seems to exist between different members of the agricultural hierarchy. The former leader of the GSF is for example reported to have said about the leader of the cooperative union after a heated debate in a meeting in the office of the minister of agriculture: “I will show him who is the leader (naqib) of the farmers.” This was a response to the latter’s claim to be the only legitimate representative of the farmers. More worryingly however, is that the minister of agriculture, Ayman Farid Abu Hadid, is also airing the idea that the different unions should be merged together by law. Notwithstanding the lack of cooperation, if the government is sincere in its request, it will be a blow to the independent organisation without access to influential mediators.

The fishermen’s union: politicisation from below

The fishermen in Kafr al-Shaykh have also organised syndicates. In the village, they have chose to keep it independent in order to retain its ties with the fishermen there. They do cooperate with another fishermen’ syndicate based in Burj al-Burullus. This syndicate also received some technical assistance during the process of registration, which remains bureaucratic and drawn out, despite al-Bura’i’s declaration. The syndicate differs from the other because it is a part of a politicisation of the fishermen in the village. Several of the founding members engaged politically in different ways after the ousting of Mubarak, for example they participated in a local sit-in at the mayor’s office.

They engaged more directly with their own institutions as well. For example they succeeded in organising elections in the fishermen’s society – comparable to the cooperative societies of the farmers. The society had not had real elections for years. Usually, only seven fishermen had been nominated, making elections superfluous for the seven seats on the board, which had become monopolised by the sitting members. After the 25th of January uprising, they sought to take control over the board forcing a general assembly where they nominated competing candidates for all the seats. The general assembly ended in a verbal fight, and the election was postponed for a year. The people who initiated these events had not previously acted politically and so they indicate a political awareness and a new willingness to engage. The trade union is an extension of this political engagement: as one of the leaders told me: “before there was no awareness, but now it is spreading.” To the leaders and the other members, establishing and joining the local syndicate
is a conscious choice.

The fishermen that are forming the union have protested before, against certain land reclamation projects carried out in the eighties and nineties, when parts of the Burullus were drained. At the time there were huge protests and clashes with state security, which arrested many of the fishermen. Especially the fishermen remember it as a very bad time with harsh repression for the village. The experience has become an important part of the background against which the fishermen react. The change brought by the 25th of January uprising is faith in the potential for change. This has mobilised particularly groups that previously have mobilised.

The contrasts of the example of the unionised fishermen are especially clear compared to the farmers who chose not to participate or some the farmers’ unions. In addition to the middle-aged farmer I interviewed in Kafr al-Shaykh, one of my informants in al-Qalyubiyya had tried to set up a syndicate but said he had failed to convince the farmers. They did not think the syndicate would be able to change anything, and refrained from joining. In their words, the only way to defend their interests as farmers was to use ṭālāṣa, or a middleman.

Another example are some of the farmers’ unions, in particular the GSF and the GSEF. Both seem to be dependent upon pre-existing political networks to reach out to the members, but neither seems able to follow up and politicise its base. Without that, both syndicates become reliant on patrons and “mother networks,” and loose the necessary independence. Compared to these examples, the fishermen are politically aware. For them, the establishment of a syndicate is a proactive step taken to gain a voice in the bureaucratic apparatus and influence decisions that impact on their livelihoods.

**Political mobilisation after the 25th of January uprising**

The most important, but not exclusive dimension for post-uprising political mobilisation among farmers and fishermen has been the dissemination of labour syndicates. The Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights assisted more than 120 new syndicates in one and a half year after the revolution for all working groups, including several for fishermen. For farmers, more than forty different unions have appeared. There is however differences in their potential for change. The organisations that seem the closest to power also seem the farthest from the countryside. The people on the top levels of some of these new organisations also seem caught in the rules of the old game. Partly, it is a reflection that many of them have been a part of the rural establishment – albeit marginal – since before the uprising, or tied to other networks. It is also a result of a state apparatus that has not been reformed, and thus continue to encourage networks of patronage in a corporatist system.

The networks of power continued in the rural periphery as well after the uprising. The rich landowners and rural notability continue to accumulate land, and is some respect it is even easier than before. Building on agricultural land, for example has expanded faster after the uprising. The fishermen’s union in Burj al-Burullus similarly reported that the pace of fish farms encroaching upon the lake increased after the uprising. That dispossession of land from poor farmers and transfer of the lake from common to private property continue shows that these practices are socially rooted. The state bureaucracy and especially the security apparatus were weakened after the uprising. Pressures from the local power holders, the rural upper class, drive the practice of dispossession.

Mobilisation in the countryside has mostly been in response to these social pressures. It has not been omnipresent, but in the places where it has happened it has politicised the participants. My informants expressed dissatisfaction with the current market based economic system that structures the agricultural and fishing sectors, although the responses varied from passivity to participation in political initiatives. Among the latter, the politicisation had caused them to take proactive steps. Even it “the deep state” is able to reassert itself after the coup d’état on the 3rd of July, it cannot change the past experience of political mobilisation that many of the trade unions represent. In the long run, this can prove to have a democratising potential for the relationship between state and citizens in Egypt, a revolutionary change.
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6 Brown, *Peasant politics in modern Egypt : the struggle against the state*.


10 Interview, Cairo, 13.11.2012.

11 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 26.10.2012.

12 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 2.12.2012.
13 1 faddān = 24 qirāṭ (pl. qarārīṭ) = 0,42 hectare.

14 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 30.11.2012.


17 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 2.12.2012.


21 Ibid., p. 252.


24 Ibid., pp. 248-52.


26 Interview, al-Daqahliyya, 26.11.2012.

27 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 30.11.2012.


29 Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: p. 261; see also Aal, "Farmers and cooperatives."

30 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 25.10.2012

31 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 26.10.2012.


33 The Westernmost of the lakes, Lake Maryût, is located next to Alexandria. It is divided into several smaller “lakelets” by roads and infrastructure, and over half of the historical lake has been drained. It is also extremely polluted as it receives much of Alexandria industrial waste and sewage, making in less suitable for fish farms.


37 Bush and Sabri, “Mining for fish: Privatization of the” commons” along Egypt’s Northern coastline,” p. 23.
40 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 25.10.2012.
44 The Higher Committee for the Liquidation of Feudalism was established in 1966 as the regime’s response to the murder of the activist Salah Husayn Maqlad. He had used his position with the ASU to agitate and mobilise farmers against the continuing power of the Fiqi-family in the village.
46 Ibid., pp. 138-40.
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50 Ansari, Egypt, the stalled society: p. 130.
52 Aal, “Farmers and cooperatives,” p. 298.
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58 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 24.10.2012.
59 Bush and Sabri, “Mining for fish: Privatization of the” commons” along Egypt’s Northern coastline,” p. 23.


67 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 26.10.2012.


69 Interview, Kafr al-Shaykh, 1.12.2012.

70 Interview, al-Qalyubiyya, 2.12.2012.


73 Al-niqāba al-‘āmma li-l-fallāhīn, see ibid. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qadir died in a traffic accident on the 21. September 2013. There has not yet been an assembly to determine his successor, although Rif’at Juddahir has been nominated to fill his place in the fifty-member constitutional review committee.

74 Quoted in Yehia “Revolutionary farming.”


76 Al-Niqāba al-‘Āmma li-Fallāhī Miṣr.

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