

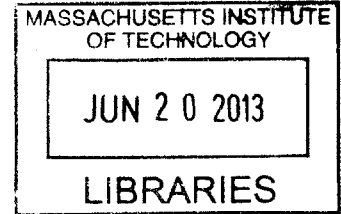
Dynamic Alliances: Political Economy of Labor Organization in Post-Revolution Egypt

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ABSTRACT

The last decade in Egypt has witnessed significant innovations in the structure of social organizations spurred by the fraying of central government legitimacy. Within this dense network of new social actors independent labor unions have emerged as some of the more innovative groups, commanding material assurances and institutional change from firms and on occasion central and municipal governments.

Understanding how this happens entails a historical view of Egypt's political economy, and the changes engendered by a succession of leaders beginning in 1952. The Nasser leadership in many ways constituted a reaction to the dynamics of colonialism, though much of Egypt's history since has been similarly premised on negotiating relationships with foreign creditors and domestic demands. In the face of these complex relationships there are and have been a set of local actors successfully making claims and influencing the state in spite of the popular reading of an ironclad regime, impervious to social influence.

Building on labor action and social movement theory, the limitations to the sites and kinds of institutional change enacted by workers are clear. Nonetheless, in Egypt these groups are acting in new and surprising ways, defying assumptions about group identity, building strategic partnerships with related religious and pro-democratic organizations, and exerting pressure on a variety of state institutions. This thesis seeks to understand the strategic choices these unions are employing in recruitment, negotiation, and direct action and in particular their relationships to other movements.

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INTRODUCTION

“Over the past thirty years Europe’s influence has transformed Cairo. Now...we are civilized.”

Isma’il Basha, Khedive of Egypt, late 1860s¹

Modernization, historian Timothy Mitchell reminds us, is a rhetorical device. The term is assigned to a continuous process that has persisted unabated, since the formation of anything resembling an Egyptian civilization. For the purpose of understanding Egypt’s current circumstances it is important to consider the multiple uses of this term as a justification for development policy decisions, recommendations from abroad, and local grassroots political action. Here this term is often used to refer to a stylized depiction of development and industrial growth with the aim of improving material outcomes for Egyptians.

In popular discourse, recent development trajectory evidences an abnegation of state interest in alleviating the distributional outcomes of dire poverty, and by extension the state of living for most working-class individuals and families. The abnegation of responsibilities, however, is less the cause so much as it is the interpretation of the Egyptian central government’s means of pursuing economic growth and material welfare. The shift towards free markets and incentivizing foreign investment in the mid 1970s constituted a direct response away from the socialist policies set in the wake of the 1952 revolution. Indeed many demands by broad swathes of Egyptian urban poor today,

¹ Raymond, Andre. *Le Caire*. Tr. Wood, Willard, 2002. p. 312

organized labor among them, are related to material concerns like housing, transportation, price of food, and quality of education.

This thesis seeks to understand the links between the project of “modern” development and the outcomes produced for working-class Egyptians through changes in macro policy. Outcomes are measured using the metric of grassroots political movements, with particular emphasis placed on working-class Egyptians employed in a variety of sectors. At its core, this project takes an understanding of the 2011 Revolution as an outcome of these developmental orientations, and political processes fundamentally rooted in the history of the Egyptian state. At the same time, it also posits a theory of political transition, in which these actors are now negotiating their respective roles to one another, at the same time exerting pressure on the consolidating institutions of the state.

The pages that follow concentrate on the actions of the class of politically engaged citizens drawing on identities as members of the labor force, and active participants in the economic project of the nation. These workers have leveraged claims against the state and firms as Egyptian citizens for almost a century. Their political labors have born significant fruit, but the direction of political mobilization post-2011 is still undefined and defies any reading of a “worker’s movement” as a coherent entity. To that end the divergent goals and mechanisms of these workers are examined in some detail with implications for the relationship between the central government and low- and mid-wage workers, and between classes of workers to one another, as well as alternate social movements.

Contrary to trends in late capitalist countries, the number of unions and overall union activity has grown exponentially in Egypt in the last 5 years.² This is particularly striking in Egypt, where a state-established union infrastructure has existed for decades. However it is no secret the state has exercised an enduring and deeply entrenched grip on the function of daily life. In fact, independent unions formed, not in spite of the existence of state-backed unions, but because of them. In many ways this is a story of the central government's fraying legitimacy on all fronts. Labor unions form the focal point of this study, but it is of utmost importance to consider labor's strategic relationships to other strands of civil society. I attribute the 2011 revolution, in some way parallel to the 1952 revolution, as the outcome of strategic alliance between organized labor, organized religious associations, the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, and liberal pro-democracy intellectual movements.

If social mobilization and pressure comprised an outcome of modern development and a significant source of pressure on the state, an alternate facet of modernist development, comprised primarily of political economic priorities, is measured by ledger books, and accounting. These turns are well represented by historical references to cycles of "profligate" spending and ensuing state bankruptcy. References to decades of periodic "reversal[s] in economic fortunes," are taken out of the relevant context of the central government's complicity in making decisions that would trigger changes of fortune or inability to weather shocks. In other words: "Egypt's insolvency and its progressive subordination to foreign powers first slowed [the pace of

² Bayat, Assef. *Workers and Revolution in Iran*. 1987

infrastructural projects], then put an end to them altogether. Ruinous loans contracted in Europe [and]...forced Egypt into bankruptcy.”³ This account of late 19th century Egypt rings eerily true of present balance of payments crises, welfare measures and plans for economic growth tied to development of the Egyptian desert.

A cyclic preoccupation with imported design tenets in the name of replicating a western-modern urban form took the form of incrementally rolled-out infrastructural developments such as electric plants, and the creation of a water infrastructure through devolution of municipal water supply concessions in the late 1860s. Toward the end of the decade, the inauguration of the Suez Canal signaled the supreme mastery of French engineering and the expansion of a great financially lucrative waterway. This canal, its original infrastructure intact, remains the most valuable asset in the possession of the Egyptian state. The follow-up engineering marvel, the Aswan Dam, built in 1902 irrevocably altered the passage of the Nile and the nation’s floodplain and broader ecosystem with particular ramifications for future agricultural production. These infrastructural developments were rewarded by significant returns as witnessed through increased life expectancy and rapid population growth.

These mid-19th century experiments with European urban infrastructure created some significant returns, however as there are winners, these developments brought about fierce segregation. The effects of spatial and infrastructural developments permeated beyond physical infrastructure: “in 1872 [one particularly wealthy neighborhood] paid 33 percent of the city’s taxes, and [one particularly poor urban

³ Raymond, p. 317.

neighborhood paid only] 2.7 percent.”⁴ The result of 19th century development schemes was a bifurcated city, and further divided country,⁵ a pattern that has only been exacerbated in the decades since.

Against this backdrop of a growing population, improving infrastructure, and incredible inequality, the Egyptian population began to chafe under a corrupt central government that advanced the interests of wealthy landowning Egyptians second only to English colonial interests. There are many parallels between the independence movement and events today. At its core, the project of economic development led by British occupiers triggered resistance in the actions of a disparate assortment of social movements engaging in campaigns of collective action, and helped in large part by the support of the military. In a similar fashion the economic policies of Sadat and Mubarak are cast in extractive terms, and have generated a response of resistance from marginal strands of society, both in collaboration, and recently in tension with one another as the project of state reformation begins in earnest.

The following chapter devotes some space to explaining the relevant kinds of literature engaged, the research methodology employed, and in general terms situates the findings within this literature. The third section provides a survey of Egyptian development and the rhetorical shifts employed to justify particular economic growth and urban and rural development orientations. At their core, I argue, these changes in

⁴ Raymond, p. 318

⁵ It is worth noting that urban bias, in many ways, is nowhere more exaggerated than in Cairo. Egyptians colloquially refer to the city as *Oum al Dounia*, or Mother of the Universe, and the Egyptian Arabic name for that country, *Masr*, is also used to refer to the city of Cairo. A last example is the name for the downtown *Wust al Balad*, translates literally to Heart of the Country.

position are the product of interpellations between the domestic context and pressure from abroad, with profound ramifications for the Egyptian working class. Stated otherwise, pressures from domestic elites and abroad translated into pressure exerted on the Egyptian working class primarily, but on the Muslim Brotherhood and liberal intellectual activists as well, in a cyclic function, where these groups have exercised countervailing weight against the state.

The fourth chapter details material outcomes in numeric metrics. I claim these analyses evidence the outcomes of the development trajectories elaborated in the third section. I argue these outcomes established the pressure from which Egyptian workers coalesced as a standing movement, first staging wildcat strikes and demonstrations in opposition to organized state institutions. The fifth section provides an extensive analysis of the response by labor organizers, taking a view of the mass proliferation of independent unions as a significant novel development and a mechanism for engaging firms and government, against the unrepresentative formal state unions.

In the final chapter I position the actions of labor unions within the context of a broader milieu of social actors, many drawing on origins in the 1952 Revolution for independence. Many of these groups have reconstituted their identities and missions in the past decade, informing the 2011 Revolution by drawing on points of commonality to achieve political ends. By extension, many Egyptian labor unions and broader social movements are being asked by wealthier classes or the central government to subsume these 'outcast' identities to the broader project of building the nation state and macro-economy, though it remains to be seen whether or not these groups will pursue a self-

interest congruent with the forces in political control, or continue their pursuit of oppositional politics in hopes of shaping the contested state structure.

METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE

Mapping the dynamics of social change in post-2011 revolutionary Egypt entails an understanding of social movement identities as malleable and multi-dimensional. The focus on labor unions represents an interest in understanding the actions of a specific class of actors responsible for organizational innovation in the period immediately before and following the 2011 regime change. The economic power of these labor unions situates them in a unique relationship to the developmental paradigm and rhetoric advanced by the central government. By the same token, their organizational innovations were the product of a milieu of political activism and a changing understanding of political agency. This story draws on decades of government-directed policies articulating economic and urban development goals to understand the sense of exigency spurring labor, pro-democracy, religious and other actors to retaliate in the face of a crisis of government legitimacy.

To pull this story together a great deal of time has been devoted to understanding Egypt's political, economic and development history. Embedded within this literature are theories of state development, and models of economic growth and distribution. Chief guides in this subfield are Stanford University Egyptian labor specialist Joel Beinin, and Columbia University Professor of modernity Timothy Mitchell. Galal Amin provided literature critical of the development agenda of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East spanning the mid-20th Century through 2011, particularly where operating in collaboration with external lenders. There are many other scholars writing on the subject of "unruly corporatism" and the transition from state led to partially free-

market capitalism in Egypt over 1952 through the late 2000s.⁶ Lama Abu-Odeh was particularly instructive in understanding the character of state institutions, particularly the courts, in the face of development history.

The narrative of Egypt's economic development is dictated by the central government, in which open markets were pursued alongside de-densification and extensive suburbanization of housing and industry. The outcomes of these policies have positioned Egyptians to form and associate along and across various identities, reflexively informed by cultural context. I situate my own semi-structured interviews within this historical literature, social movement theory, and union theory. Assef Bayat is one of the chief authors of a theory of collective action of dissent against authoritarianism in the Middle East, in concert with many authors on the subject of grassroots social movements, and unions specifically, making claims on the state. Another layer of this literature is the role of unions in facilitating democratic transition. In considering the shape of the newly formed representative union bodies, democratic theory and theories of democratic change are instrumental, particularly for parsing the difference between demands and mechanism enacted by these unions.

Principal original research was conducted over 3 months during Summer 2012 and January 2013. This research took the form of interviews with independent labor union leadership and spokespersons, journalists and pro-rights, pro-democracy activists and staff at economic and personal rights non-governmental organizations. These interviews were further supplemented by multiple e-mails exchanges with urban

⁶ This is a reference to Robert Bianchi's 1989 book of this name. Significant contributors also include Marsha Pripstein-Posusney, Ellis Goldberg, and Robert Springborg.

planners, development consultants, and some academics in the field of economics at the American University in Cairo.

Initial interviewees were identified for their prominence in NGOs advocating for social and economic rights. These interviewees led to connections with labor journalists and academics. Staff members at the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights were particularly instrumental in providing contact information for independent trade union organizers. The trade unions contacted were identified for their relative prominence and success in strategic organization and winning favorable outcomes from firm management in terms of wages, rooting out corrupt firm governance, and winning positions of organizational leadership in management. These “successful” ten or so independent unions interviewed are, of course, not necessarily representative of the over 1000 other independent unions, but share common traits and symbolic significance worth considering.

Interviews with labor organizers were exclusively conducted in Arabic, and are the result of work with a translator. For this reason, quotations are paraphrased though as best as possible capture the spirit of these movements. Most interviews with journalists were done in English, and interviews with pro-democracy activists and NGO staff were entirely in English.

At its core, this thesis argues the popular reading of the Egyptian Revolution is flawed. The interpretation of religious identities as the new cleaving point for Egyptian citizenship disregards that class and economic standing have proven the most enduring and rigid point of division within society. Though Islamists, workers and intellectuals

have at different points have operated in opposition to the state, these identities map onto class and in fact, I argue changes in socio-economic outcomes and expectations engendered the broad changes in the mid-2000s. Instead of the religious-secular reading, I offer a tripartite division of power contrary to the discourse that has emerged in the popular media and most analysis of the revolutionary and transitional period. This is not a struggle between “secularists” and Islamists, it is a struggle between pro-democracy liberals, workers and ideologically-Islamic political parties against the institutions of the centralized state, represented in part by holdover military and ironically named National Democratic Party, and increasingly strands of Islamic political parties. Of course it is possible for a worker to identify as pro-democratic, and Muslim. These identities are not so rigid as they are portrayed, through increasingly, as the contest for political power continues, they have come to represent increasingly divisive points, and as Abu-Odeh claims: workers are increasingly caught between populist or liberal discourse, Islamic state ideology, and the function of market capital.

MODERNIZATION: DEVELOPMENT, INDUSTRIALIZATION, AND THE WORKER

“Cairo, far more than any Western city of comparable size, is a city of contrasts and contradictions, of extremes and anachronisms. ...Cairo combines the passing traditionalism and agrarianism of an Egypt that has existed for centuries with the industrial modernism of an Egypt yet-to-be.”

Janet Abu-Lughod. *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*, 1971

“We believe that the protection of Egyptian national security is a necessity of life, which stipulates consolidating the unity of the national fabric, achieving justice among all citizens, achieving comprehensive development in various aspects of the Egyptian economy and enhancing urban development, political reform, the redistribution of population to low density areas...”

Freedom and Justice Party Founding Statement, 2011

The process of industrialization in Egypt is marked by the repeated intervention of domestic and international forces. Points along the path to ‘modernization’ can be identified by large-scale production of cotton as a lucrative export crop, the subsequent rise of manufacturing, and the expansion of large industrial centers in the suburban desert periphery. In response to these shifts Egyptian economic and political history is peppered with accounts of an active labor apparatus that has mobilized around material and political concerns. The particular organizational form of Egypt’s labor force as a political entity has evolved, though its role as a political force has endured. The following constitutes a survey of events in Egypt’s economic history, demonstrating pressured relations between the Egyptian state and labor at the intersection of “modern” development goals and individual economic and personal rights. This background serves to illustrate competing views of the modern state and its responsibilities, torn between the logic of economic growth and distribution or welfare.

Within the Egyptian context, labor action has served as the primary *modus operandi* for Egyptian citizens to articulate demands for economic and social rights, though this has not always constituted the rhetorical framing of these demands. Often the interests of workers and society at large intersect in ways that prove strategic for both. This analysis focuses primarily on the actions of workers as related to overall material welfare concerns related to workers' particular economic leverage. As noted by author Omar El Shafei, the working-class in Egypt includes a broad range of actors across industries, socio-economic classes, and education levels; nearly all of who have engaged in some form of labor demonstration at some point. Obviously the nature of demands and protests defy easy categorization. Unless otherwise specified I refer to workers as the class of laborers employed in industrial or agricultural manufacture, by and large earning irregular and minimal wages when compared with the class of urban, white-collar workers.

It is also worth stating, workers do not enjoy a monopoly on the use of an economic and social rights framework. Indeed, the rhetoric and policy positions adopted by the state make heavy use of the same language. This use is two-fold. First the Egyptian state has shrouded its policy shifts in the palatable language of rights, and collective well-being. Second, the state's strategic use of economic and social benefits to the poor and working class comprises its most potent tool in domestic peace-keeping through co-optation and pacification of labor interests. Finally, the rhetorical use of modernization weaves together the most coherent account of economic policy. The pursuit of economic growth through a rational, scientific capitalist system cannot be

underestimated as the logic underpinning the orientation of Egypt's government, both as its own endogenous desire, but also that imposed by actors from abroad. The language of modernization can be seen as a means to the end of economic well-being in the rhetoric of Egyptian political leadership.

Early Post-Independence Development: Nationalism and Dictatorship

The decade immediately preceding the 1952 Free Officer's Revolution was marked by general public unrest. Particularly strong currents of labor action in the 1940s through early 1950s served as a catalyzing force in the independence struggle.⁷ The outcomes of this revolution for labor were many, but two are worthy of close consideration. Labor's participation in the 1952 struggle infused the independence movement as a whole with "a radical social consciousness,"⁸ informing subsequent political action by workers and setting an early tone for social engagement in the new republic. Second, because the nature of the struggle was against both a British state and British corporate class, labor was considered part of the nationalist movement in the same sense that the immediate approach to industrial policy following independence was explicitly nationalistic to the exclusion of partnerships with foreign capital.

In this sense, that the Free Officer's military regime and Gamal Abdel Nasser's approach to industrial policy followed a statist, paternalistic orientation is completely unsurprising. Timothy Mitchell, quoting a political economist in 1940 captures the sentiment: "The growth of the democratic and national spirit in Egypt after the war has

⁷ Beinun, Joel, *"Labor, Capital, and the State in Nasserist Egypt, 1952 – 1961"*

⁸ *Ibid.*

made the nation aware that helping the fellah [small agriculture land-holding] is not only a duty, but an insurance against social unrest..."⁹ The post-independence Free Officers faced the same conundrum faced by the fledgling government today. Labor had asserted its radical political weight, but the consolidating state sought to mitigate the "threat to social peace, which might destabilize the new nationalist regime and disrupt Egypt's economic development."¹⁰

The concerns that mobilized Egypt's working class under British rule allowed for a consolidation of interests and expression of solidarity with the nationalist movement, however, labor's particular concerns remained unresolved by independence alone.¹¹ Nasser's industrial policy prominently featured benefits to the average Egyptian worker, though in the immediate sense, any benefits accrued to workers were ancillary to the project of economic growth and state stability.¹² Comprehensive plans for both economic growth and urban development incorporated the melding of public housing and industry, established through the Ministries of Housing and Defense, and tied to public sector companies, creating large public housing developments alongside medium to heavy industrial centers.¹³ These developments were located predominantly in nearby suburban Cairo developments, and were largely viewed as attempts to pacify a vibrant and vocal labor force.

⁹ P. 39

¹⁰ Beinín, Joel, *"Labor, Capital, and the State in Nasserist Egypt, 1952 – 1961"*, 1989

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Cook, Steven. *The Struggle for Egypt*, 2011

¹³ Sims, David. "Urban Slums Reports: The case of Cairo, Egypt." 2003

Prior to independence, agricultural production was concentrated in the hands of a wealthy landowning rural class, but in the aftermath of the 1952 Revolution land redistribution attempted to further the emergent state's interest in reorienting development priorities from large, increasingly corporate cotton production to intensive industrialization. Redistribution served the state's goals, not only in its pursuit of privately financed high-yield industry, but for the appearance of a populist break-up and redistribution of large landowner holdings.

Though the Egyptian government had hoped private investment re-directed from cotton-production would fund industrialization, the results were tepid owing to perceived instability. Against its intentions, the nascent government ultimately bore primary responsibility in planning and financing industry. Industrial projects helmed by the state included the development and manufacture of rail steel, electrical cable, and rubber tire industries.¹⁴

Conflicting narratives have emerged regarding the stance of the Free-Officer's government to workers. Various politically active currents today praise the socialist orientation of the Nasser government. These individuals cite Egypt's 1960s cities created along Cairo's periphery, like Helwan, as industrial hubs, emblematic of the distributive aspirations of the state, featuring worker's accommodations, and clubs, and heralding the willingness of the state to operate as the primary economic driver.¹⁵ Popular consciousness dictates workers were relatively well cared for under Nasser, though others contend in a paternalistic manner that pacified labor and allowed little room for

¹⁴ Beinin, Joel, *Labor, Capital, and the State in Nasserist Egypt, 1952 – 1961*, 1989

¹⁵ Interview at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, June 2012

dissent or political participation. Benefits provided to the peri-urban working classes translated into a content worker class, and more importantly one less interested in engaging in large-scale demonstrations, and politically friendly to the state.¹⁶ Legal historian Lama Abu-Odeh captures the effect nicely: “soon the political tradeoff of (I give you) economic well-being for (you give me) political power, took hold.”¹⁷ Critical histories also indicate the state relied heavily on violent repression of a radical left labor movement in the name of economic growth and stability.¹⁸ The orientation of a paternalistic state, engaged in both harsh repression and strategic pacification, evidences the link between material considerations and in some sense, national security. The power and rhetorical use of this link persists today.¹⁹

Both are true accounts. Purges of labor union leadership, frequent imprisonment and occasional executions were hallmarks of the early independent state. Subsequent threats from other segments of civil society, particularly the rise of the Muslim Brothers, prompted the state to pursue a more favorable orientation towards workers “to control industrial conflict, increase the purchasing power of workers, and encourage greater productivity.”²⁰

In response to growing unrest Nasser’s regime established the first trade union federation in 1957, carefully selecting its leadership to assure maximum compatibility

¹⁶ Interview at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, June 2012.

¹⁷ Abu-Odeh, Lama. “On Law and the Transition to Market: The Case of Egypt.” 2010

¹⁸ Beinīn, Joel, *“Labor, Capital, and the State in Nasserist Egypt, 1952 – 1961”*, 1989

¹⁹ Interview, Cairo, Egypt, July 2012

²⁰ Beinīn, Joel, *“Labor, Capital, and the State in Nasserist Egypt, 1952 – 1961”*, 1989

with regime aspirations.²¹ Similar gestures were made with other social movements. As Abu-Odeh writes: "...in the nationalization process, the objective was not restricted to property, but also included social movements, associations, and syndicates."

On the whole, expansions of worker benefits or repression were not uniform. At the level of national policy, favorable attitudes and accommodations of private capital happened to entail pacification of workers: in exchange for a cessation of strikes, workers were guaranteed job security in the early years of the independent state. The creation of the national union apparatus also has dictated much of the course of labor action over the past 50 years, and at long last erupted in multiple increasingly aggressive conflicts and the creation of a parallel institution in the independent union movement.

To speak of a program of industrial development, it is necessary to include a reference to the legal structure protecting the corporatist-socialist state. Nasser's "National Charter" included legislation that moved the productive capacities of the state toward industrial manufacture, through investment laws, laws establishing public companies, relief for small landowners, legislation related to foreign exchange, tariff protection, and customs duties. The coherent shift included measures like Nasser's program of land redistribution, and shifting the main of the labor force from rural to urban industrial production. According to Abu-Odeh, this entailed agricultural land reform, land tenancy laws, rent control, labor laws, associational laws, food subsidies and price controls.²²

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Abu-Odeh, Lama. "On Law and the Transition to Market." *Emory International Law Review*. P. 370; Each of these laws entails its own set of literature and merit significant

From its mixed, but generally repressive origins immediately following the 1952 Revolution, Nasser's regime responded to the Suez crisis and 1967 War against Israel by issuing a series of decrees nationalizing a host of manufacture and commercial enterprises.²³ These decrees can be viewed as the effects of a nationalist reaction to international tensions, and resulted the appropriation of foreign owned firms, most of which became part of the public sector.²⁴ These steps constituted the consolidation of power between the Egyptian military authority and the bourgeois industrial class, and the advent of concerted economic planning. Subsequently, 1962 saw at least partial-nationalization of all banks and heavy industry, and a series of laws aimed at worker's living standards passed shortly thereafter. Among these were limitations on the workweek, reduced to 42 hours; doubling of the minimum wage; the introduction of social insurance; and government commitments to supply administrative jobs to all university graduates, and manual jobs to all graduates of secondary school.²⁵ A third wave of socialist legislation in 1963 further nationalized 405 arms factories, transport facilities, mines and other industry companies.²⁶

The 1967 Six Days War with Israel and subsequent War of Attrition stunted the creation of any developmental agenda of the Nasser presidency, effectively tying the state's resources to a very different kind of developmental agenda. Not only did

discussion, though this may not be the best place for legal analysis past indicating that a coherent network of poor and working-class welfare securities was provided in the Charter.

²³ Abdel-Malek, Anouar. *"Nasserism and Socialism,"* 1964. p. 40

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ El Shafei, Omar. *Workers, Trade Unions and the State in Egypt, 1984 – 1989.* 1995. p.

16

²⁶ *Ibid.*

production fall as a consequence, but the state suffered considerable losses with the loss of Sinai Peninsula and by extension the incredible revenue generated by oil extraction and oil transport through the nationalized Suez Canal. Minimal external finance began soon after independence, but the nature of borrowing was small-scale, short-term loans, with favorable terms facilitated by the competitive cold-war climate between the United States and USSR.²⁷ The latter years of Nasser's rule constituted an inflection point, and in part thanks to the ballooning cost of maintaining a public sector premised on large welfare safeguards and an expensive military venture, the balance of payments began to deteriorate.

The political effects of the 1967 loss were managed in terms of popular public relations, in large part owing to Nasser's legendary charisma. Yet the real decline in wages was felt for years. Sporadic labor strikes emerged as early as 1968, and continued to grow through 1971 tied to declining material conditions.²⁸ Sadat inherited this legacy after Nasser's passing, and though real wages did not fall for years after 1974, the widening gap between the wealthiest and poorest Egyptians grew and exacerbated perceptions of economic inequality. The sum of Nasser era policies, such as welfare distribution, accommodation and strategic repression established the legacy informing subsequent worker demands.

The October Working Paper as Development Agenda, 1974

²⁷ Amin, Gala A. Egypt's Economic Predicament, 1995.

²⁸ El Shafei, p. 17

Soon after taking office, Anwr al-Sadat set about dismantling “power centers” established by Nasser around industrial sites. Sadat justified this move claiming public housing developments posed a threat to the capacity of the central government, and in an effort to capitalize on Nasser’s popularity credited these measures as the natural extension of early 1960s programs. In fact, economic liberalization was articulated as a means of alleviating the stresses of Nasser-era socialist benefits. In the tradeoff espoused by Evans, “welfare and economic growth have become conflated, mutually implicated, and entangled.”²⁹ The flagging state of Egypt’s economy motivated Sadat’s courtship of foreign capital.

Sadat’s advocacy for a turn to foreign investment and reliance on the free market without explicit assurances for worker welfare flies directly in the face of his high praise for workers and state managed socialism. His claim that the state’s responsibility “for all its sons...for giving them equal opportunities, securing the right to work, providing them with social services, insurance, and medical care,” is successively undermined by the rest of the policy document. The paradox of Sadat’s goals is further set up in his articulation of Nasserist rhetoric: “...I believe in socialism and that it is the only solution to the problem of progress.”³⁰ He articulates this belief, while in the same document dismantling of the policy that provided Egyptians guaranteed income through public-sector employment. “Undoubtedly the public sector experiment was marked by

²⁹ Evans, Peter B. *“Embedded Autonomy”* 1995

³⁰ Al Sadat, Anwr, *The October Working Paper*, 1974. p. 48

some drawbacks. Bureaucracy reigned in some of its positions..., [in] managed utilities that should have been scattered or left to the private sector.”³¹

Among other free-market policies, he argues for a wholesale switch from domestic agriculture in favor of increased industrial production expanding beyond Nasser. Explicitly stated: “Our main hope for providing our increasing millions of people with food lies in Egypt’s ability to export enough of its industrial products in return for the needed food supplies.”³² Under the belief that industrial production for export would provide revenue well above domestic agriculture, Egypt gradually moved from being a net exporter of food to a net importer. A short three years later a rise in the price of wheat, and subsequent deficit in the balance of payments evidenced the folly in this thinking.³³ This had obvious implications for the ability of workers to afford means of subsistence, as well as locating them increasingly in mid to heavy, and increasingly private industry.

The working paper justifies reliance on foreign debt and aid, echoing the thesis that wealthy states owe developing countries development assistance. Though Nasser sought to meet budget shortfalls through foreign cash as necessity, Sadat pursued it almost by right. In his paper Sadat argues: “We are fully aware that the burden of progress and construction falls principally on the shoulders of the Egyptian people. Whatever local resources we can mobilize, we still have a great need for foreign

³¹ Al Sadat, Anwr, *The October Working Paper*, 1974. p. 57

³² Al Sadat, Anwr, *The October Working Paper*, 1974. p. 65

³³ Amin, Galal.

resources.”³⁴ While some foreign loans, notably from the Soviet Bloc, were used to finance development under Nasser, Sadat’s statement signaled in no small way the turning point in the government’s willingness to rely on significant amounts of capital from the International Monetary Fund and western institutions, this move laid the foundation for subsequent conditions and constraints on state actions.

By the same logic, and in synchronous step with turn of the century infrastructural projects, Sadat further argues the state should leverage scientific innovation to stimulate the use of its landmass to the end of greater economic output: “[There is] new technology to be gained with an outward looking orientation,” and, relying on scientific advances to alleviate economic strains. This section, more so than most others marks the imperative to rely on scientific progress to unlock the potential of Egypt’s latent industrial apparatus. In this mindset Sadat calls for the development of new industrial cities, claiming no new developments had been pursued in over 100 years.

Current debate about the pattern of intensive desert expansion suggests this was a strategic choice with a two-fold logic. The first logic dictated Egypt’s development had heretofore been constrained to the banks of the Nile, only the smallest fraction of Egypt’s landmass, and exploitation could yield high investment and revenue. Anyone who has spent time in greater Egypt has seen the manifestation of this policy in large, hulking factories pumping black exhaust clouds situated in the middle of flat, barren desert. The second, cynical logic suggests a strategic choice intended to defang labor.

³⁴ Al Sadat, Anwr, *The October Working Paper*, 1974. p. 61

This claim gains currency when viewed in alongside the construction of later industrial cities in further, more remote desert locations.³⁵ As early as 1974, however, there may have been some grain of truth to this argument. These cities, many created by presidential decree in the late 1970s by Sadat, and mid 1990s by Hosni Mubarak offer one of the most fascinating points of entrée in understanding the frontiers of labor organization in Egypt today. This development is particularly striking for the overwhelming success of labor organization in some of these cities, and its complete absence in others, as discussed in subsequent portions of this thesis.

With the benefit of hindsight it is remarkable to see how profound the effect of this document, much less the logic of modernization espoused has been over the last three decades, particularly for the circumstances of Egyptian workers. The mid 1970s program of economic opening, broadly defined, articulated an objective of enhanced quality of life for all Egyptians, not entirely divorced from the stated objectives of Nasser's guided distributive capitalism. Through increased economic liberalization and preference for investment from international firms, exhibited through pressure on domestic producers and workers, the stated objectives of widespread economic welfare were expected to result from completely different means than those pursued by Nasser.

The effects of Sadat's orientation are well documented in ethnographic and literary form. One particular hallmark includes the relocation of working class and urban poor residents in central Cairo to public housing on what was in the late 1970s and early

³⁵ This hypothesis was the subject of speculation with two journalists and one urban planning professional; all three agreed his was a plausible, if not likely explanation.

1980s the outskirts of the city.³⁶ Increasingly, young men with low or mid-skill attainment were forced to seek jobs abroad in oil wealthy neighboring nations, a boon in years when oil was at a high, and a curse when it was not.³⁷

The research on these satellite cities in English is limited, though the oldest were formed in the 1970s, ever expand outward, and aimed at gradual densification. The net effect has proved a relocation of Cairo's wealthy and middle class populations, a relocation of industrial centers, an the proliferation of poor communities to service these centers, to say nothing of the sprawling informal communities that crop up to service the needs of construction crews.

Subsidies at a Breaking Point in 1977

After the publication of the October Working Paper, more so than at any point prior, foreign debt came to rule as the dominant force shaping the narrative of Egypt's economic growth and attitudes towards citizen welfare. The primary vector along which debt has affected government economic orientation is the use of conditions related subsidies for basic consumer goods.

Subsidies were established as World War II rations, and the legacy of these expectations established a context wherein over 20 foods were made regularly available and any moves to dismantle these subsidies were met with public outcry.³⁸ By 1980

³⁶ Ghannam, F. "Keeping him Connected." 1998 p. 67

³⁷ Abu-Odeh. "On Law and the Transition to Market: The Case of Egypt," 2010.

³⁸ Salevurakis and Abdel-Haleim, "Subsidies in Egypt: Choosing Social Stability or Fiscal Responsibility." 2008

subsidies had expanded to account for one-seventh of government spending,³⁹ and terms of trade favored wheat, Egypt's largest import, over cotton, its number one export. The trade deficit, owing to this imbalance, constituted as much as 15% of GDP.⁴⁰ At the same time, the Egyptian state relied on the use of short-term debt, serviced by commercial banks at interest rates of, at times 15%.⁴¹ In 1975 this kind of borrowing constituted as much as 35% of Egyptian debt.⁴² This position was exacerbated all the more as Egypt's inability to pay down its debts on time resulted in even further fines.

By all accounts, over the period 1977 through 1981, Egypt's balance of payments should have appeared more favorable. The economy boasted real growth of 8-9 percent, oil exports were ten times what they were before the 1980s, and labor remittances from abroad were estimated to have risen from \$998 million to \$4 billion.⁴³ Instead debt grew by 76% over this period.

In response to this situation, and at the behest of IMF demands to deal with ballooning debt, the government raised prices on refined flour bread, rice, tea and sugar, and other non-food commodities. The result was a series of incredibly violent 1977 protests led by the working class in which 77 Egyptians were killed. By way of response the subsidies were quickly reinstated and the IMF immediately issued a \$150 million loan to restore order. Conditions tied to the issuance of increasingly frequent loans, are widely credited in conversation on the streets of Egypt, as precipitating in the

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Amin, Gala A. Egypt's Economic Predicament, 1995. p. 9

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid* p. 10

dismantling of welfare measures and by extension the brutality of the state for its inability to fulfill basic needs for the Egyptian poor.

1990s Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programs

Following the 1980 assassination of Sadat by Islamist fundamentalists, the first few years of the Mubarak Regime featured relative calm attributed to effective and harsh repression of organized labor coupled with a boom in oil production and revenues from the Suez Canal.⁴⁴ Yet, despite a stated intention and elaborate plans to reduce reliance on foreign debt, the trend persisted. The total value of export of goods and services decreased in 1985/6 from 1981/2 by 11%; compounded with the need to pay old debts at increasing interest rates. Egypt was left again with a deteriorating balance of payments.⁴⁵ The subsequent fall in wages in 1984 sparked what some consider the beginning of a wave of sustained and growing labor protests, particularly in the textile sector; this growth in labor activity is elaborated at length in the following chapters.

By 1990, Egyptian debt had expanded to 150% of GDP.⁴⁶ This share of debt created a situation wherein sources of external credit were tightened, and as such, it became increasingly difficult to meet the obligations of food imports.⁴⁷ Directly tied to external debt, and particularly debt forgiveness was the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program Law 203 of 1991. The World Bank and IMF had in recent years taken the Mubarak regime to task for slow implementation of economic reforms,

⁴⁴ El Shafei, p. 19

⁴⁵ Amin, Gala A. Egypt's Economic Predicament, 1995. p. 14

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 17

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 17

and Law 203 was the belated articulation of the conditional reforms tied to loans from almost a decade prior.⁴⁸ Since the earnest implementation of privatization in 1991, over one third of all state owned enterprises had been sold, with nearly 190 publicly held firms finding their way into private hands over the following three years.⁴⁹

The program of privatization continued and expanded in 2004, with increased cash receipts and record sales of public industries.⁵⁰ GDP expanded and the World Bank awarded Egypt the designation of number-one economic reformer in the Middle East, and among the best performers in the world.⁵¹ At the same time inflation reached a fever pitch at 35% for food products and 25% at the general level.⁵² Writing in 1995, El Shafei, posits that the 1991 ERSAP law, in keeping with the steps taken by the Sadat regime prior, may have signaled the unraveling of Egyptian social fabric.

Shafei justifies this claim arguing the support of the state afforded to workers was further undermined in the passage of this law. In this sense we can understand some of the subsequent labor demonstrations in the early 2000s, but more pointedly, the landscape of current demonstrations after 2011, in which private and public sector unions exhibit shockingly different levels of organizational capacity in response to divergent institutional contexts, and labor market outcomes are radically unequal for workers in private and public occupations along class, education, and gender lines. If the

⁴⁸ Beinin, J. *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Eds. Vairel and Beinin. 2011

⁴⁹ Beinin, J. p 186

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

development agenda of Nasser was bound by warfare, Mubarak's development agenda was bound by budget shortfalls and structural adjustment programs tied to aid.

The narrative, then, is one in which the Egyptian state is unable to weather exogenous shocks; falls in regional oil prices see a return in workers abroad and the flow of remittances dries up. But, because of the aid-reform link and the prioritization of foreign investment there are few domestic entities capable of providing meaningful employment. The extension of this, then, is an economic model that perpetuates the export of raw materials such as cotton and minerals. In fact, owing to global competition at present, the cotton used for domestic consumption is frequently made with raw material produced in Egypt, woven cloth is sent to Southeast Asia for production of garments, and reintroduced to the Egyptian market for sale at quite high prices. The economic circumstances have reverted to the raw material export of high colonialism. Realistically, investment from both Egyptian and foreign sources are likely not to change without significant alterations in fiscal policy or exchange rate.⁵³

Indeed the rhetoric of "economic opening" has so permeated Egyptian institutions, that the Supreme Constitutional Court views any semblance of import substitution policy as a market distortion to be removed in favor of the "rules of contract and property, rules of the market."⁵⁴ From 1997 onward, the SCC increasingly wraps its decisions in the language of U.S. jurisprudence, offering both protections to the function of markets, but increasingly drawing on the rhetoric of civil and political

⁵³ Haggard and Kauffman. *Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*. 1995 p. 10

⁵⁴ Abo-Odeh. p. 371

rights. This has placed the court as a unexpected ally to the diverse identity-rights based movements that have proliferated in recent years.

In addition the larger economic plans evidence a macro-policy with respect to urban poor in a number of ways. The first relates to the basic demand for affordable housing, and relationship between transit to work, as articulated by some unions. If low wage industrial work is increasingly located in peripheral Egypt there is a de facto displacement in the face of commuting costs, particularly where firms are not willing to provide means of transportation. Second, if, as suggested of Sadat's relocation of industrial centers, worker-housing agglomerations are broken up, or relocated away from places of work, there is little opportunity for workers to associate and form meaningful union representation.

The industrial cities, of 6 October and Sadat City provide two interesting cases in this dynamic. Both are designated Special Economic Zones, a designation Mubarak created to attract capital investment, advertising general ease of management, based on the expectation of low unionization levels.⁵⁵ 6 October City, established in 1979, is comprised almost exclusively of heavy manufacture, with some housing stock built by the national government, and some affordable housing among these, however the vast majority are middle, to upper class homes.⁵⁶ These developments, however, are fairly

⁵⁵ Advertisement material from Saudi property manager. CPC Egypt.
<http://www.cpcegypt.org/why4.html>

⁵⁶ New Urban Communities Authority. <http://www.urban-comm.gov.eg/english/cities.asp>

recent as the current population is roughly 500,000,⁵⁷ though implementation of the most recent urban development plan hopes to create a city of 5.5 million.

According to the New Urban Communities Authority of the Egyptian Government, 6 October City is a “major industrial city” and home to automotive production; industrial and electronic manufacture; timber; furniture; plastics; paper; spinning and weaving; building materials; metallic and mechanical manufacture; and chemical and pharmaceutical manufacture for Proctor & Gamble.⁵⁸ Advertisement from the Saudi holding company CPC boasts industrial parks offering affordable labor, ideal location and strong management capability.⁵⁹ On the whole 6 October has a very weak union presence, a fact attributed by many to the absence of permanent residents, a disproportionate number of workers commuting from Cairo,⁶⁰ and the city’s remote location. If labor were to organize and hold demonstrations who would know?

By contrast Sadat City, with a population of 79,000, offers more housing as a ratio of workers and residents.⁶¹ Economic activities include electrical and engineering manufacture; timber processing; plastics; paper; spinning and weaving; building materials; metallic and mechanical manufacture; and chemical and pharmaceutical manufacture according to the New Urban Communities Authority, though this leaves out automotive assembly, an incredibly important industrial player in the Sadat City

⁵⁷ Emporis, population data. <http://www.emporis.com/city/6th-of-october-city-egypt>

⁵⁸ New Urban Communities Authority. <http://www.urban-comm.gov.eg/english/cities.asp>

⁵⁹ Advertisement material from Saudi property manager. CPC Egypt. <http://www.cpcegypt.org/why4.html>

⁶⁰ Anonymous Labor Union Spokesperson, Interview, January 2013

⁶¹ New Urban Communities Authority, http://www.urban-comm.gov.eg/english/sadat_living.asp

economy, complemented by an equally strong independent union. In fact Sadat City boasts one of the few strong municipal federated unions. Workers in Sadat City have gone on city-wide strikes across sectors and have won considerable concessions in terms of pushing firms to hire workers with formal contracts.⁶²

Many have questioned what the revolution meant for the implementation of further central planning initiatives. By and large it appears the development schemes contained within these plans will continue, though at a decelerated pace and in less coordinated fashion. In fact, there has been some speculation that given the contestation happening at the most visible scales of Egyptian political life, it has become far easier for independent ministries to continue their pursuit of policies set under the prior administration, or altered slightly, but generally uncontested. Even the national plan for economic development, as recently as February 2013, devotes the bulk of its discussion to propagating the objectives of alleviating population density in and around Cairo, and focusing development of industry and job creation to the city's out-lying areas.⁶³

Despite the anti-democratic and unrepresentative nature of the Nasser regime, the early independence period still holds an esteemed position in the minds of Egyptians. The ensuing development agendas and polarizing outcomes have resulted in a continued crisis of legitimacy met with broad social movement activity. Despite the

⁶² Anonymous NGO Staff Member, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. Interview, July 2012; Anonymous Journalist, January 2013

⁶³ Reeve, Christopher. "What Ever Happened to Cairo 2050?" *Egypt Independent*, 2011.

popular reading of the iron clad state, the central government has been subject to the demands of popular political activity, a trend that has only grown exponentially in recent years. While this activity has had a mediating effect on the practices of the state, it would be overstating their impact to say central government is set at the grassroots level. Central coordinated plans still dominate, and the most cynical reading of these demonstrations suggests they provide the best possible cover for the central government to continue business as usual while spectacle rages in the public consciousness. The development agenda set by the current political apparatus remains to be seen, though one wonders if the necessary institutions are sufficiently consolidated to overcome the spates of protests that have marked the first two years since the revolution; these protests less a cause, but more a symptom of the articulated vision or actions of those in power.

The succeeding chapters evidence the thought that social movements, particularly those of the urban poor, are shaped by economic forces and macro-economic orientation. Effectively, the trajectory of economic development, beginning with Nasser laid the foundation for the 2011 Revolution for the slow dismantling of worker protection, reliable jobs and wages reasonable for the cost of living.

UNITENDED CONSEQUENCES: LABOR MARKET OUTCOMES 1988 -2006

The Egyptian Labor Market

Revisiting the theme of state obligations, and in particular the relationship between industrialization and economic growth, the need to consider distribution of wealth or minimal levels of welfare forms the basis for this chapter. The development agendas enumerated in the prior chapter yielded mixed results, in great measure depending on vantage point. The following analysis endeavors to parse the outcomes for workers and low- and middle-income Egyptians through secondary data analysis. The outcomes these data speak to in every sense inform worker and movement identities and suggest they are premised on economic outcomes.. This analysis of social movements, and workers movements particularly, is embedded in a culture of highly skewed power dynamics. While survey data of labor market outcomes are useful, they must be interpreted as embedded within cultural forces, particularly in Egypt, where a great deal of cultural misunderstanding informs policy proscriptions from abroad.

To focus the theory underpinning this project, and echo a theory of collective action: “work and the rewards of work underpin the stability of social institutions...”⁶⁴ There is a general argument to be made about the role of the social contract, and the betrayal of set expectations in revolution theory⁶⁵ well on display in the 2001 Egyptian context, particularly as seen in the outcomes for poor working class Egyptians. The

⁶⁴ Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard Cloward. *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. 1978.

⁶⁵ Lefebvre, *and other* in Piven and Cloward.

corporatist-compact⁶⁶ consolidated in the Nasserist developmental paradigm which featured robust social safety nets and attendant economic and material changes engendered by Sadat and Mubarak map onto the degradation of state legitimacy.

Class is in many ways most visually legible dimension of identity in Egypt, though it operates in complicated ways. Cutting across class is the parallel erosion of social structures and institutions evidenced by frequent accounts of young men who cannot afford marriage or are forced to immigrate to oil wealthy regional labor importers.⁶⁷ From Ghannam's 1999 ethnography, it is clear that families and individuals are limited in the kinds of dwellings they can afford. Those who do not have high-paying jobs, or jobs abroad are constrained and encouraged to look at homes in the satellite cities, importantly, disconnected from their families and typically places of work. The prototypical young male protagonist in Ghannam's account, Magdy, despite his well paying job abroad is considered fortunate for his ability to find an apartment in the relatively poor Cairo neighborhood of Hamra, filled with public housing units from the 1960s.⁶⁸

Recent changes in the labor market have similarly affected Egyptian women, who despite net gains in labor force participation are increasingly unemployed or underemployed. To reiterate the narrative of the prior chapter, despite the 5 percent

⁶⁶ El-Mahdi, Rabab. "Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil"

⁶⁷ Ghannam; Beinín, Joel "Egypt at the Tipping Point" *Foreign Policy/The Middle East Channel*. 2011.

⁶⁸ Ghannam, F. p. 76

economic growth between 2004 and 2011, estimates by the World Bank indicated nearly 40% of all Egyptians lived at or near poverty level.⁶⁹ Stated otherwise:

“...the wages of most blue and white-collar workers are insufficient to sustain a family. The cutbacks in government social spending have shredded the social safety net put into place by the authoritarian-populist regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser.”⁷⁰

A survey conducted by the donor-backed NGO, The Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, Iran and Turkey published significant labor market survey data for Egypt in 1998, 2006, and most recently for 2012.⁷¹ It is worth noting the importance of this data, as it represents, per the literature discussion around it, some of the more complete data available on the Egyptian Labor Market. Generally ERF’s work is more comprehensive than that of the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, though the 2012 data was collected in partnership with CAPMAS.⁷² Some accounts suggest much of CAPMAS data comes from and used by international aid organizations, but retained and presented within CAPMAS’s publications and central database.⁷³ This dynamic becomes all the more problematic given the development dynamic of international intervention presented in the preceding chapter. It goes without saying that data are highly subjective and bias can be introduced at any point, thus the blurring of sources within the CAPMAS database is cause for some concern.

⁶⁹ Beinín, Joel. “Egypt at the Tipping Point?”

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ The 2012 data are highly anticipated, as they will show the first quantitative analysis of the economic impact of the revolution, but they are as yet not publicly available.

⁷² Assaad, Ragui. “HHH Prof. Ragui Assaad receives World bank grant for first national survey to gauge economic impact of revolution in Egypt.” Feb. 9, 2012.

<http://blog.lib.umn.edu/gpa/globalnotes/2012/02/hhh-prof-ragui-assaad-receives.php>

⁷³ E-mail exchange with anonymous development practitioner. June 2012.

The ERF produced a book *The Egyptian Labor Market Revisited* on Egyptian labor market outcomes between 1998 and 2006, and occasionally refers to a prior 1988 survey by CAPMAS. Generally the report suggests strong macro-growth in the early 1990s, followed by external shocks in the latter part of the decade, and strong recovery through to 2006.⁷⁴ The survey also suggests in the period between 1998 and 2006 employment ratios were up by a ratio of 4.6% relative to the growth in working age population, while unemployment had fallen from 11.7% in 1998 to 8.3% in 2006.⁷⁵ Though these numbers paint a favorable picture, they are qualified by the “structural change” in the economy from secure public sector employment to increased informal employment, which is included as employment in this survey.⁷⁶ In recent years informal employment stands close to 61% of all employment.⁷⁷ Additionally, though wages are increasing, there is far more non-wage work, as surplus labor is re-locating from the public sector into household enterprises and family farms.⁷⁸ Thus earnings are skewed at the higher end of the spectrum. Furthermore, gender segmentation is such that middle and upper middle class educated females who could rely on the public government sector for jobs have witnessed a sharp decrease in economic participation rates given the contraction of these jobs.⁷⁹

Increasingly the labor market features growth in numbers of technical secondary school graduates, across the country, and a steady reduction in the proportion of

⁷⁴ Assaad, Ragui. *The Egyptian Labor Market Revisited*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. xvii

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 2

illiterate males and with no educational credentials.⁸⁰ In fact, women's education composition is similar, with a precipitous decline in illiteracy between 1988 through 2006, from 81% to 47%. Women still do not make up a significant proportion of technical secondary school graduates, but the gains in high school education are significant, particularly in rural Egypt, though the data speaks little to the improvement of economic outcomes or quality of education, though many more Egyptians are obtaining credentials. Generally, Assaad attributes the most significant changes in the market labor force to changes in population growth and a youth bulge. This change in composition and general population trend square with the popular characterization of the Revolution in 2011 as a youth movement, triggered by frustrating labor market experiences.

Given the noted contraction of the public sector, private sector employment, by contrast has grown at a rate of 7.8% per annum over the study period, by contrast, the decade 1988 – 1998 witnessed private sector growth of 3.2% per annum.⁸¹ The rapid increase in private sector employment as witnessed through the data, can be in part explained by the impact of a labor law 12 of 2003, formalizing what were previously unrecognized private sector employment relationships, and categorized as self employment or independent contracting. While the law formalizes employment, it does so by making it easier for employers to offer fixed contracts rather than long term employment that entails worker protection and wage increases over time. At the same time, creating fixed contracts allows employers to terminate employees with severance,

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 34

or, through the far more frequent employee termination through the widespread practice of forged employee signatures authorizing premature dismissals without severance.⁸²

Further characteristics of the labor market speak to the concentration of labor in small firms, with more than half of all wage employment occurring in firms of fewer than 5 workers.⁸³ Over the period discussed only firms of more than 30 – 40 workers increased their share of the work force. Though degree of informality correlates with firm size, even the largest firms employ roughly 25 percent of their workforce informally, alongside employees with formal contracts. In fact one of the main recent demands of formal, independently organized workers is for full and formal contracts for their informal co-workers. It merits repeating, formal contracts are useful, but as a practical matter do not always entail labor security in the ways one might expect.

The data above evidences the merit to discussing the character of the highly segmented Egyptian working population. The labor market can be roughly divided into “traditionally higher-paid segments” comprised of males, white-collar workers in managerial or professional positions, highly educated workers, and those in mining industries or financial and real estate services; and “traditionally lower paid workers” comprised of females, blue-collar workers, especially in unskilled jobs, less educated workers and those in agricultural, or public and personal services.⁸⁴ This stratification

⁸² Anonymous Journalist, Interview. July 2012.

⁸³ Assaad, Ragui. *The Egyptian Labor Market Revisited*. P. 39

⁸⁴ Said, Mona. *The Egyptian Labor Market Revisited*. P. 56

becomes important for the composition of union leadership, relationships between unions, and tensions between divergent strands of civil and general society.

An account of the Egyptian labor market must also take into account the bifurcation between Upper Egypt, the Nile Delta, and its primary urban center Alexandria, and the Greater Cairo Region. The industries predominant in Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) are above all raw materials processing through agriculture and mining. Entailed within this division is a layer of racialized social attitudes dating back to the colonial era that favor individuals from Cairo and the Delta region over Upper Egyptians, which many view as the nation's ill-educated cultural backwater. Timothy Mitchell devotes an essay to the construction of the rural peasant and decoupling the rhetoric used by foreign observers to describe the darker skinned "primitive" Egyptians in strong contrast to their civilized Northern counterparts. This general sentiment has informed the language Egyptians from the Delta region use to describe their compatriots, and permeates policy decisions.⁸⁵ The essays by Assaad and Said both note the gains in unemployment and education as partly attributable to significant gains in Upper Egypt specifically, and focus on the labor market outcomes for women.

The erosion of state guaranteed employment to citizens completing post-secondary education and attaining a college degree proved a significant turning point in

⁸⁵ Indeed the Sadat presidency was considered a momentous occasion, as he was considered the first president from the *fellah*, though his upbringing did not really evidence the same low quality education nor extreme poverty characteristic of Upper Egypt in the 20th century.

public sector employment.⁸⁶ The displaced segment of the labor market has comprised one of the most vocal aspects of the labor movement and constituted a significant bridge between the low-wage laborers and a more educated liberal middle-class, though as we see, has also resulted in the diminished economic participation of educated women.

Speculating based on the accounts I have heard and read, particularly statements by researchers like Joel Beinin, many posit a link between these eroding labor outcomes and demonstrations: “since 1998 there has been a rising wave of strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations and other actions by workers, with a big spike after the acceleration of the implementation of neo-liberal policies...” Even if the data from 2006 do not make this explicit, the pressure to remove subsidies, privileging of the private sector, and privatization of land continued. In fact compounding the 1990s/2000s balance of payments crisis described in the prior chapter, external shocks like the global financial crisis and the rising price of wheat owing to environmental shock only exacerbated the conditions of stagnating wages in the low-wage sector.⁸⁷

Finally, given its overwhelming size, the informal sector of the labor market merits some discussion. In keeping with the account provided by Assaad and Said, women dominate the informal economy as the primary entrée into economic participation for poor, less-educated and young Egyptians.⁸⁸ The ILO survey used to inform this understanding of the informal sector is somewhat dated, though extensive

⁸⁶ Assaad, R.; and El-Mahdi, Alia “Toward Decent Work in the Informal Sector: The Case of Egypt” 2002

⁸⁷ Amin, Galal. *Egypt’s Economic Predicament*” p. 1995

⁸⁸ El-Mahdi, “Toward Decent Work in the Informal Sector: The Case of Egypt.” 2002

in its review of the market characteristics. In 2002 as many as 82 percent of existing micro and small enterprises were informal, a concerning proportion given the account of growing small enterprises given by Assaad. The survey further corroborates the changing face of employment generation, citing the public sector as responsible for generating more than one third of all employment opportunities for decades before 2002, and more than half of all non-agricultural paid work since the 1960s.⁸⁹ Much of what the labor force is responding to is the dismantling in 1978 of the state obligation stemming from Law 14 from 1964 to hire all university and secondary school graduates in state owned enterprises or government positions within two and three years respectively of their graduation. Yet despite the change in 1978 the state remained the primary employer until the early 1990s, a story corroborated by the wage analysis.

In response to these changes, and the relationship between education in the private sector, the informal economy quickly emerged for its ability to generate low cost-per-job employment, particularly in the face of the regulatory hurdles to formal small enterprise creation. These hurdles are all the higher for poorly educated, often illiterate, young informal entrepreneurs, which despite the rise in educational attainment in terms of credentials, still characterizes the majority of rural and poor Egyptians.

A. El-Mahdi describes informality as a sustainable form of employment, and while the persistence of the informal economy may be true and very meaningful on a macro-level, there are significant labor insecurities and questions of sustainability for

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 1

the individual worker. El-Mahdi's account indicates expansion in unemployment over the period 1988 through 1998 was most pronounced in rural areas, and among educated and new entrants to the labor force. El-Mahdi attributes the growth in the informal sector to the loss of jobs within the rural parts of Egypt.⁹⁰ At the same time, a parallel trend in job loss in urban areas triggered a reverse in urban to rural migration compounded with the rising cost of living in urban areas relative to the wages these migrants are earning.⁹¹ This can also be understood as a contributing factor to the increase in unemployment and informal employment in rural Egypt. There are interesting embedded questions in the rural-urban link and the creation of new satellite cities, when there are significant lags in educational attainment and economic development in preexisting cities in Upper Egypt. One wonders if the racialized character of Egyptian policy in part explains the frequent relocation of rural to urban migrants in sparsely populated suburban settlements.

In theories of poor people's movements, Piven and Cloward offer a theory of incentives to collective action forming from a belief that arrangements could be otherwise. The articulation of new labor movements evidences dissatisfaction with state unions and a plurality of material demands. This can be viewed as an exercise in airing frustration with the dynamics of splintering labor outcomes for the poorest in Egypt, and the failure of governance mechanisms for a broad coalition of workers. The actions

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 5

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 7

of the independent trade unions in the subsequent chapter are direct responses to the circumstances described in the above analyses.

While the ERF research offer in large part a heavily quantitative depiction of circumstances in Egypt, the accounts of workers themselves supply the fine grain perception of how and where these numbers are translated into lived experience, suggesting the link between distribution and crisis.⁹² These labor market outcomes come in relationship to the overall crisis of authoritarian lack of legitimacy. Unless these outcomes are coupled with the a nuanced understanding of the implications within sector and within region, policy will continue to be set in such a way that macro growth is read as net benefit to all, when stratification and segmentation are the punch line undergirding attractive numbers.

⁹² Haggard and Kauffman. *Political Economy of Democratic Transition*. 1995

CONSTRUCTING WORKER IDENTITY

“Trapped in the interstices of: (1) the ideological hegemony of the market that rationalizes its worsening conditions, (2) the populist discourse of corporatized unions that misrepresent its interests, and (3) the non-alternative Islamist discourse of ethical capitalism – the working class stands to be the biggest loser in the transition from ISI to Market.”

Lama Abu-Odeh, “On Law and the Transition to Market,” 2010

Writing about Egypt has witnessed a recent renaissance; volumes explaining the 2011 “uprisings” are in no short supply. This paper is not an assessment of a particular policy, but seeks to link the effects of a history of economic development that purported to pursue growth as a proxy for distribution to the circumstances for Egyptian workers. From this context, I develop some understanding of the recent phenomenon of increased labor activity and the intersection of labor unions and other strands of civil society in their pursuit of change. The shifts in growth strategy, beginning in a 1970s reorientation away from import substitution industrialization and distributional safeguards, to encouragement of foreign direct investment, provide the political economic background for the increase in labor activity since 2006. This background facilitated a dynamic confluence of social and historical forces far more nuanced than the depiction of the 2011 revolution provided by popular western media.

The dominant opposition groups exercised a degree of collective agency in dynamic directions, building strategic, but contingent partnerships. A brief history will focus the embedded nature of the newly established independent trade unions and their concomitant strategic partners and tease apart the linkages that formed. While this is not a review of policy, it is a review of the response by social forces acting in

collaboration leveraging strategic economic assets related to their position as workers. Within the last decade NGOs or individuals are increasingly adopting a lexicon in direct opposition or appropriation of responsibilities of the state. These organizations espouse a view of the responsibility of the state, and a response to dissatisfaction with the mechanisms of fulfilling these obligations. These associations also evidence a claim on the meaning of Egyptian citizenship, one that now cleaves across identities of solidarity in the lead up and immediate aftermath of early 2011.

Beginning in 2008, independent trade unions represent one amongst a host of new organizations that have emerged within roughly the last decade that have gradually replaced the function of state institutions in the face of fraying legitimacy. At times an allied organization, at others a hostile organization, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps the most prominent social movement, and at present political organization fulfilling a similar function. Like the trade unions, the Brotherhood has engaged in significant provision of basic services like water and sanitation, disaster relief and welfare assistance in place of the state. Though the formation of consolidated activists groups has only recently found articulation among young middle-class Egyptians, pro-democracy activists have in a similar exercise of organization and collective action. Of course Egypt, like many countries, has a rich history of educated middle-class intellectual opposition movements. The independent trade unions in particular draw on common points of group identification, particularly prominent direct action campaigns against wide scale privatization or police and government brutality in the face of direct actions.

This chapter intends to tease out these points of identification, as well as offer some elements of the dynamics at work between three case-independent unions. Based on their organizational strategies and pursuits I argue these groups do not espouse the ideologies that are often ascribed to them by the middle-class pro democratic movement. Instead the three primary actors I have defined, workers, Islamists, and “secular” pro-democratic activists, draw on one another as allies to exert pressure on public and private firms, and the central government itself.

Catalyzing Episodes

A contextual background suggests the macro-orientation towards development, parsed through the relationship between labor and institutions of the central government has primed contemporary Egyptian workers to consider themselves agents of change. The literature on periods in Egypt’s labor activist history has linked specific episodes to direct action within specific sectors. Egyptian labor historian Joel Beinin and Lockman’s *Workers on the Nile*, describes, for an English-speaking audience, the history of rail-workers as the cross-section of Egyptian labor pushing for serious concessions from the government and corporate governance in the lead up to independence in the 1950s. The late 2000s witnessed the proliferation of widespread action within textile companies across the Nile Delta in the lead-up to the 2011 Revolution. The current moment has seen the proliferation of independent unions in response to a necrotic state apparatus of multiple unions distributed through all public and partially public firms. All three periods of episodic, large-scale activity operated in partnership with (and

sometimes opposition to) members of the educated middle class, and strands of the Islamist movement, and nowhere with more success than in the 1952 and 2011 revolutions.

In response to widespread militant labor activism Gamal Abdel Nasser established the General Egyptian Trade Union Federation. This militant furor came in response labor-state relations at a breaking point, culminating in the execution of two labor leaders in 1954.⁹³ “[S]ingular, compulsory, non-competitive hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories [were] recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state, and granted a deliberate representational monopoly,” as part of the Nasser’s broader post-colonial socialist shift.⁹⁴ The state-created union federation is still quite large, with 23 industry subsectors to which all public unions must belong.⁹⁵ Thus, each public or public-private firm retains a state-backed union, increasingly in opposition to a separate, independent union.

Union formation and social movement theory draws on the importance of constructing movement identity, though at its core, this paper argues there is no coherent character to the independent “worker’s movement” beyond economic circumstances. To say, as many do, that there is a unified political agenda, even in the current revolutionary period, would be to grossly oversimplify the intent and spirit of wage-workers who engage in political actions. Though there is no central identity,

⁹³ El-Mahdi, R. “Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil”

⁹⁴ El-Mahdi, R. “Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil”

⁹⁵ Beinin, J. in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Eds. Beinin and Vairel

meaningful points of identification have everything to do with class and a growing belief in collective power, and less with stated political ideology or religious affiliation.

Contrary to trends in late capitalist countries, the number of unions and overall union activity has grown exponentially in Egypt in the last 5 years.⁹⁶ If rail workers were the brokers of independence in the mid-20th century, the analogous segment of the politically active labor force in the latter quarter of the 20th century is popularly understood to be the Egyptian textile worker. This perception is informed by the understanding that textile manufacture constituted the locus of productive labor, and the positioning of most textile firms in the public sector also directly implicates the economic health of the state. Beinín and Lockman presciently concluded their analysis of labor activity, predicting the onset of worker led demonstrations in the mid-1980s signaled the deterioration of peaceful relations between labor and the state and labor and industry.

A great deal of academic literature from the 1980s onward has constructed the Egyptian textile worker, with many authors ascribing the willingness of workers to engage in strikes and demonstrations today to organizational success among textile workers in the 1980s. The mid-size, single-sector textile manufacture town Mahalla el-Kubra functions as the epicenter of popular labor action and has facilitated the formation of a coherent legacy in the latter half of the 20th century leveraged by workers, pro-democracy activists, and at times members of the military regime. Mahalla is widely regarded as a fiercely political industrial city, capable of mass demonstrations

⁹⁶ Bayat, Assef. *Workers and Revolution in Iran*.

that grind a significant portion of the textile industry to a halt and garner attention from the mass of the Egyptian press apparatus.⁹⁷ Reference to Mahalla el-Kubra punctuates any conversation about labor organization today. It can be said there is a clear a parallel between contemporary workers citing the success of the tax assessors, the first independent union in 2008, in equal measure with the Mahalla activists.⁹⁸

R. El-Mahdi links the new phase of social protest to neoliberal change in macroeconomic policy in 2004, though in El-Mahdi's estimation this represented a novel shift for the fact that demonstrations in the mid-2000s adopted a color of pro-democratic rhetoric, as much as they were related to work conditions and fair remuneration.⁹⁹ These sentiments are best captured in the statements of strikers in 2008: "We want change in the structure and hierarchy of the union system in this country...I want the whole government to resign... I want the Mubarak regime to come to an end. Politics and worker's rights are inseparable. Work is politics by itself. What we are witnessing right now, this is as democratic as it gets."¹⁰⁰ In El-Mahdi's telling these were the first pro-democratic demonstrations in nearly 50 years. Contrasting Egypt to the Brazilian experience of trade unionism before and after the transition from brutal dictatorship, El-Mahdi argues Brazilian trade unions gave up class-based conflict for

⁹⁷ Self Monitoring Manual: Textile Industry *Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs*. P. 8

⁹⁸ El-Mahdi, R. "Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil"

⁹⁹ El-Mahdi, R. "Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil"

¹⁰⁰ Stack and Mazon, "Striking Mahalla workers demand government fulfill broken promises" *Daily Start Egypt*. Found through IkhwanWeb. September 29, 2007. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=14208>

“non-confrontational trade unionism of participation, negotiation, and partnership that in general acquiesces in the rules of capital.”¹⁰¹

Ultimately this is an overly generous reading. As I will elaborate below with specific case studies, the trade unions that espouse pro-democratic political agendas – that is, outside of their internal organizational structure – are easily in the minority. While such an organizational structure is meaningful in a largely unrepresentative national setting, that it does not translate to a political agenda is similarly telling. Furthermore, unlike Brazilians, Egyptians still lack a consolidated system of governance with whom to bargain, and in fact a unitary reading misses the fact that unions, since 2011, have chosen to pursue a range of strategies, some in fact negotiating directly with firms.¹⁰² In fact this is all the more significant given that these unions used to approach the negotiation table with the aid of pro-democracy activists, though if anything this new model evidences “general [acquiescence] to the rules of capital.” On the whole, however, El-Mahdi argues Egypt, unlike Brazil increased its action against the state, and she is not entirely wrong, only to say that the same set of institutional circumstances does not immediately apply, and such a reading misses the nuance of strategic choices and motivations available to independent unions in Egypt today.

These early 2000s protests described by El-Mahdi were initially met with harsh opposition from unions backed by the state, which frequently informed security forces or engaged in direct violent conflict. In 2008, at Mahalla, the result was lethal force used

¹⁰¹ Antunes and Hallwell in El-Mahdi, R. “Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil”

¹⁰² Anonymous Journalist. Interview, Jan 2013.

to quash the planned demonstration, with two protestors, one a 15 year-old boy, killed. Resentment from this event sowed seeds for broader participation of different classes alongside broader labor movement participation in the 2011 revolution. This specific event consolidated the April 6 Movement youth movement, a solidarity group formed by middle class youth activists, as a potent force in Egyptian politics, now with banners, a broad middle and upper middle class membership, and the ability to mobilize these members as well as garner significant media attention. A general account of this event, however, misses the animosity engendered by pro-democracy activists' appropriation of this event for their own ideological goals. In the aftermath of the violence, there was a palpable sense that the strike would not have resulted in the altercation and deaths with police had pro-democracy activists not publicized plans for the strike.¹⁰³ Since April 6, 2008 many similar youth groups have formed and reformed, most prominently among them the Revolutionary Socialists, a group with roots from the mid 1990s. This is not to insinuate these groups are bungling or ineffective, to the contrary, they are exceedingly powerful, intelligent and generally impressive. Rather, these anecdotes are intended to draw attention the tension in objectives, and conflicting perceptions of who is supporting whom and the best mechanism for capitalizing on that support.

¹⁰³ El-Mahdi, R. "Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil"

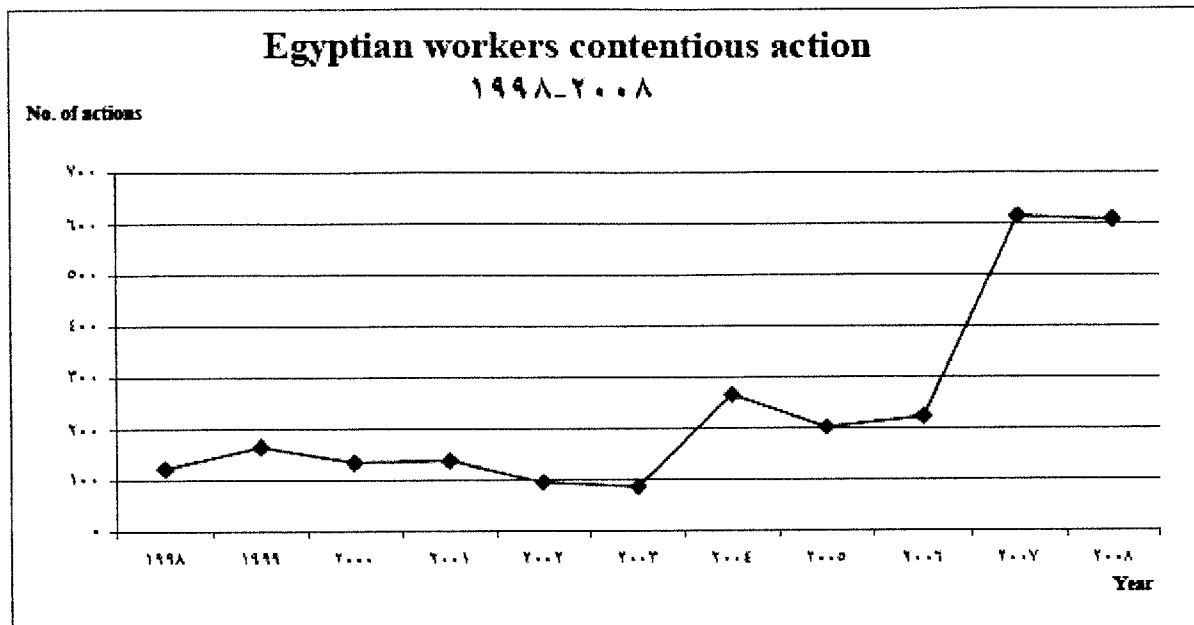


Figure 1. El-Mahdi, Rabab. "Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil," 2009

In the growing wave of labor demonstrations, which in the above graph spike by approximately 400 additional demonstrations (from 200 to 600) between 2006 to 2007, significant institutional gains came in 2008 with the creation of the first independent union, and a 2010 high profile lawsuit. The formation of the independent union is discussed in greater detail below.

In 2010, former presidential candidate Khaled Ali litigated on behalf of an individual mill worker, accusing the government of not "ensuring an adequate minimum wage."¹⁰⁴ Ali and the plaintiff won a favorable court decision, and the National Council on Wages was ordered to raise the minimum wage for the first time in decades from USD 19 to approximately USD 72.¹⁰⁵ This legal victory was impressive, not for the least reason that it signaled the willingness of Egyptian courts to support the cause of

¹⁰⁴ Beinun, Joel. "Workers and Egypt's January 25 Revolution" p.192

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

economic and social rights on behalf of low-wage workers. Generally the narrative of economic and social rights for workers in Egypt has been little aided by the court apparatus,¹⁰⁶ though increasingly throughout the 1990s, the courts have served to enforce laws put in place to restrict worker actions and privilege private enterprise, while at the same time advancing the cause of individual rights. This conflict in outcomes can best be interpreted as the appropriation of liberal international legal norms.¹⁰⁷

The circumstances leading to the consolidation of early youth labor movements were particular, and tactics have changed significantly in the face of the new political landscape. Rather than episodic organization, these groups have begun to form standing organizational bodies in force. As stated before, mid-century legislation established a single trade union within all public industries and firms, and entailed leadership based on sham elections with predetermined winners. These unions commanded compulsory dues extracted from worker paychecks, in exchange the ability to air grievances with union leadership, though these grievances rarely ever earned audience beyond the first official to hear it. Strikes were organized in the absence of union authority, and were often violently suppressed by the state sanctioned union directly or indirectly through state security.

The Mubarak administration's embrace of privatization and gradually more repressive politics saw a response in an increase in violent activity, not simply from

¹⁰⁶ Anonymous journalist. Interview, June 2012.

¹⁰⁷ Kennedy, Duncan in Abu-Odeh. "On Law and the Transition to Market," 2010

demonstrations by labor, but terrorist activity in the 1990s through 2000s.¹⁰⁸ Mubarak's administration has always asserted forceful control, violently subduing anti-government activity. Despite the illegal status and continued violent repression of these demonstrations, and counteraction by state unions, these demonstrations persisted, gained the stature of legendary actions in the public consciousness, and eventually erupted in the 2011 protests in Tahrir Square that ultimately saw the first ever Egyptian leader willingly step down from power.

Independent Unions

The roots of independent labor organization extend back to independence and the willingness of workers to undertake great risk, and potential execution from state unions and the Government of Egypt. However, the project of constructing the institutions to coordinate these unsanctioned strikes began in 1989 and the formation of the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services, a monitoring and general training and legal advisory body made up of Egyptian workers.¹⁰⁹ While this is not an independent union as such the aim was education and support for workers by workers.

Building off of this early organization, the 2008 formation of an independent union out of former members of the Tax Assessors Union, led by Egyptian organizer Kamal Abo Eitta. The formation of the group stemmed from the unfair sacking of Abo Eitta and others for staging an unsanctioned strike, and signaled a significant act of

¹⁰⁸ Held, Colbert. C. and Cummings, John T. *Middle East Patterns*, 2010. p. 516

¹⁰⁹ Beinun, "Workers, Trade Unions and Egypt's Political Future," *The Middle East Research and Information Project*. 2013

subversion, directly articulating the bias, corruption, and inadequacy of the state institution, as well as creating a clearinghouse for tax workers to meaningfully air grievances and assert their rights. More than anything else the creation of this institution, in parallel to a pre-existing state institution, signaled a willingness to assert independence from the state at great personal risk and an interest in coordinating the activities of unions acting outside of the formal state structure. In December 2010 another, the General Union for Health Technicians formed their own independent union.¹¹⁰ Though these are both well paid professions that require a relatively high degree of education, and are comfortably positioned in Egypt's middle class, they, particularly the Tax Assessors Union, are cited again and again as the genesis of the whole wave of independent unionization.¹¹¹

Subsequent unions began to form in early February of 2011, shortly after the onset of multi-day protests in the now famous Tahrir Square. In the early days following February 9, 2011, the numbers of independent unions grew slowly, numbering in the 10s, however by June 2012 a representative of the Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights asserted he had contact information for over 400 independent unions, with formal paperwork being submitted on a daily basis. As of June 2012, independent unions remained formally illegal. Though a draft labor law from 2011 once held promise for formal recognition of independent unions as legal entities, it has since been shelved in the debacle over legitimacy of the parliamentary elections, the disbanding of parliament by Mohammed Morsi during the Summer of 2012, and the multiple delays of

¹¹⁰ Beinun, "Egypt at the Tipping Point?" January, 2011

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

the second round of parliamentary elections.¹¹² The insecure legal position notwithstanding, by January 2013 over 1000 independent unions had submitted the requisite deposit, and filed paperwork requesting recognition of union status with the Ministry of Manpower.¹¹³ The lack of a negative response to these applications signaled the Ministry's tacit support or inability to stop the formation of these organizations, though they are still not explicitly legally sanctioned.

When asked for a detailed profile of industries and sectors comprising these 1000 independent unions the coordinator for the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights cited all manner of public, private, and hybrid public-private firms were included, in many industries, and across many sizes of firms. There are informal unions for highly skilled workers, construction workers, and municipally federated unions as well.¹¹⁴ However, that the necessary paperwork has been filed, and the necessary deposits made does little to speak of the quality or character of the unions themselves. Though there are over 1000 independent unions now, a short list of the most active and most successful groups contained somewhere closer to between thirty and fifty. This is obviously far from a representative sample, though discussions with journalists offer potential explanations for why particular cross sections may be more or less successful in their demonstrations and member recruitment campaigns.

¹¹² Charbel, Jano. "Labor Law Stalled as Unions Struggle for Representation." June 26, 2012. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/labor-law-stalled-independent-unions-struggle-representation>

¹¹³ Anonymous representative. The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights. Interview, 2013 January

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Generally, one of the greatest barriers to independent union mobilization in public sector industries is the existence of parallel state run unions. There is a significant difference in the formation of independent unions in the public and private sectors, some journalists speculating that it is far more difficult to negotiate the infrastructure of completely new private-industry unions, and though more suggest without the competition and hostility from the state-backed union, the private unions are far more flexible and attract far more worker support programmatically, or materially in the willingness to pay dues.¹¹⁵ Transport workers, for example complain of the obstinacy of the state union members in stopping the independent union from engaging in strikes, a common occurrence in almost all public sectors where a prior public union exists. In fact, representative of the dynamic between many public and independent unions, the leadership of the public transit state-backed union declared in a highly publicized meeting that he did not support the formation of the independent union, but suggested such a development would severely hinder sector productivity.¹¹⁶

Case Studies

From the interviewee sample of active independent unions, the central motivating philosophy driving their is a mission to “take care of the [given] sector to make it sustainable.”¹¹⁷ This motivation is illustrated through actions like those of the Eastern Cigarette Company independent union members who engaged in outright

¹¹⁵ Anonymous Journalist. Shorouk Newspaper. Interview, 2012 Summer

¹¹⁶ Anonymous Transportation Union Spokesperson. Interview, 2012 Summer

¹¹⁷ Multiple interviews, 2012 Summer

clashes with the state run union, and were forced to protect the shop floor machinery out of appreciation for its centrality in their livelihoods and those of their families.¹¹⁸

These three cases were chosen for their representation of one fully public sector company, a private-public firm and a loosely associated organization of highly vulnerable workers. These three groups were also identified for their particular “success” having their demands met through collective action. While this does not describe the over 1000 independent unions, there is something to be learned from the mechanisms used by these groups.

The Independent Transport Worker’s Union

Three elected spokespeople from the independent transport worker’s union provided anecdotal evidence on the organizational mechanisms of their particular union. The spokesmen were all slightly older, with two drivers and the other a fare collector. Generally, they espoused the contingent nature of their wages, irregular work schedules, and shifting position within the formal government bodies as primary cause for organization, as well as hostility and outright violence from the state-established union. Demands centered generally around consistent and increased pay, regularity in the structure of payment, and the removal of corrupt public officials. Their greatest strategic asset included the ability to stop traffic and mobilize a large and vocal body of workers.

¹¹⁸ Three anonymous independent transport union workers. Interview, 2013 January.

Of the 40 thousand employees in this sector, 11 thousand had a formal affiliation with the state union, while 18 thousand had joined the independent union. The metropolitan transit workers' occupations are either in management, as drivers, ticket takers, service and maintenance, or more industrial refurbishment. The scope of the services provided by the transportation authority is huge, and this sector serves all of Greater Cairo, spanning three governorates, though under Cairo's auspices for the moment. Institutionally repositioning the transport authority has become a frequent subject of conversation, with implications for revenue location, and in the mind of the independent union, great potential for corruption. This concern was internalized from past corruption: under Mubarak the transportation authority reaped the profits of the transit system, and none of the wealth generated was shared with the workers. The gaping income disparities, the union felt, were "like being robbed."¹¹⁹ While corruption is a common grievance among unions, articulating these problems leads to the hope that significant efforts at institutional reform will be attempted at the immediate, industry scale.

In keeping with the economic development agenda, privatization of the public transportation services has been subject of discussion in the past, with plans to sell busses and lay off workers in favor of private companies in 1995. Instead public transport was handed over to the municipal economic authority, the ultimate outcome of which was the partial privatization of the public transportation apparatus, with the most profitable transit lines going to private companies. The minister responsible for

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

this sale now sits in jail for corruption. The transport authority, because it consistently earns revenue, has been shifted to a number of institutional positions within the city government since the 1970s, however, now that the independent union exists, workers have attempted to set prices based on determinations of the most profitable, i.e. heavily trafficked, routes.

When asked why they formed, I was told this union began in March 2011, with the proud designation of being the first union to register after the Revolution, though the reason for forming was not the revolution itself, but the inadequacy of the preceding union, which was not at all serious about representing worker's demands.

The spokespeople described their goals as chiefly standardizing salaries and work shifts. Currently there is a complex system of point allowances and deductions around a base salary of 308 Egyptian Pounds. In Summer 2012 this would have been USD49.68. A worker's salary month to month can range anywhere from 700EGP (USD112.90) in a bad month, to 1350EGP (USD217.74) in a good month. For some sense of purchasing power, the utilities the spokesperson pays on a monthly basis, including electricity, gas, phone service, rubbish and water, amounts to 85EGP (USD13.71), or nearly one-third the base salary. According to this driver, he needs at least 2000EGP (USD322.58) to meet basic needs of utilities, housing, food, and education for his 6 children (education is provided for free, though the quality of this public education is dubious).

Elections are the primary leadership identification mechanism. In 2012, off 11 candidates 5 were selected for a runoff, with the top three forming the official leadership body. Candidates came from any occupation within the sector. In addition to

the central leadership, there is a funding committee and a management board. The terms won were 5 years in length. The claim was that the old union is administered from the top down, where the independent union is truly grassroots. Though there is no formal mechanism for robust democratic processes in Egypt, this union followed the law of free elections, despite the lack of legal standing. To this particular spokesperson, this act of participatory democracy is a “dream come true.” Indeed, there have already been changes in leadership and alterations to elections processes, and dialogue on establishing new, formal bylaws is ongoing. Their quick change reflects the ability of the institution to adopt a model, but allow a degree of flexibility for the sake of learning.

Contrary to popular perception, the union insists it only engages in strikes when negotiations break down. This union has held two major strikes, both timed critically when school was beginning in early September, and again at the height of a diesel shortage while parliament was in session. In both cases traffic was clogged and middle class Egyptians were made to feel the brunt of the first strike, while Parliamentarians fell victim to the second. The risks associated with these strikes are very real. Not only do these workers face the risk of sackings, but given the violent opposition of the state union, all three of the men present had scars if not extreme wounds to show for their clashes. The union says it never engages in violence, claiming in fact only the state union uses violence as a tool against the independent union. Furthermore, the leadership of the independent union claims to draw on the peaceful sit in methods they learned in during the January Revolution.

This spokesperson suggested there have been 5 thousand labor strikes in Egypt between 2006 and 2011. This number is nearly impossible for me to confirm, but it represents a consciousness of the broader labor movement. As these actions are taking place and unions are shifting their bylaws to suit their needs, a narrative is being constructed that explains their success and the choice of others to enact similar demonstrations.

The union has gained serious recognition in the institutions of the governorate. The Board of Directors of the Municipal Transport Authority reportedly takes the independent union very seriously. Unfortunately this is not a uniform recognition of the legitimacy of the organization, even if its detractors clearly recognize the power in the organized demonstrations. The head of the transport ministry has public stated she has an open door to labor, though these workers suggest she has strategically closed her door to stimulate strikes, with the intent of destabilizing the Islamist Morsi administration; all this at a time when Morsi was the beneficiary of a great deal of sympathy if not hopeful anticipation, particularly from this union.

The leadership of this union suggested that other workers are jealous of its successes. What they understand to be jealousy, however, can be understood as the motivating principle behind the process of strategic diffusion taking place, within and between unions. After the success of these two strikes in securing wage assurances, many workers joined the independent union, feeling for the first time there was a truly representative body to reflect their concerns, contrary to what a free rider theory might predict.

Ultimately, this union believes the government severely underestimated its capacity, and indeed the class bias that permeates Egyptian culture makes this stance unsurprising. The overall message this spokesperson espoused was that ignoring workers and farmers was part and parcel of the prior regime's governance tactics. The time has come now for workers to show that they too are productive members of society beyond their marginal product of labor; in fact they have ideas, strength and vitality to contribute in shaping the "new" Egypt.

Eastern Cigarette Company

Beyond the ability to stage disruptive strikes, "golden eggs" constituted more often than not, the strategically leveraged capital assets under the auspices of the unions. The nearly 200 year-old Eastern Company is one of the largest producers of tobacco in the Middle East, and as such generates significant revenue for the state. It was once privately owned and foreign held, though nationalized in the mid-1950s and a public union was established. The company is now 55% public, the rest privately held.

Three spokesperson lawyers represented this independent union, which raises obvious questions of representativeness, as most of the workers at Eastern are low-wage workers. These lawyers described their strategic assets, as well as an anti-democratic organizational style and investment aspirations for the future. Like the other independent unions these men voiced a similar inspiration from the independent tax collectors and rhetorical links to the wildcat strikes at Mahalla in the late 2000s. Their demands focused, less around wages, and more around governance at the firm level,

though they spoke generally about development outcomes and the corruption of the previous regime.

The independent union claimed they were long-suffering under the prior regime, and took Kamal Abo Eitta and the real estate tax collectors as an inspiration to organize on the belief that things could be otherwise. In fact, the independent union felt the state union had clearly staked out a “disgraceful position,” taking the firm administration side in distributional disputes, but at the same time clearly benefitting from profligate corruption.

In the words of this union leadership, they are “famous” for their lack of pecuniary demands. Instead they have chosen to challenge the governance of the company and management’s willingness to extract money for personal gain, through overhead for employee meal stipends, for example. The union used the demand that the company-provided meal be cancelled altogether that the independent union was formed. Generally, strikes staged in late 2011 were ideologically popular, though sparsely attended, approximately 1000 of the 14 thousand workers attended. The strike over the meal allowance was not particularly successful, and the small membership was disillusioned.

Not too long after the Muslim Brotherhood came to power. The union expected this would be an easy alliance of formerly oppressed peoples acting in solidarity, though they have quickly realized the political echelons of the Muslim Brotherhood are some of the more ruthless capitalists anywhere, and are substantively blocking worker

freedoms.¹²⁰ Given the disillusionment with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Eastern Co. independent union opted to dedicate significant time amassing a broader following. It was at this time that the independent union leadership learned of more generous profit sharing schemes in other public companies. This revelation garnered a groundswell of support for the independent union, and they held a work stoppage on Dec 2012 in 7 Eastern factories across the country. It was at this point that they blocked main thoroughfare in Western Cairo and occupied the office of the targeted management official and refused to let him go until their demands were met. The police refused to intervene.

After 2 days a representative from the government holding company began respectful negotiations. The outcome of this strike was equal profit shares based on the allowances to the other workers, with extra allotments for dangerous work, an allowance to replace the meal provided by the company, and the sacking of several notoriously corrupt managers. In the estimation of the spokespersons, things changed overnight. The newly appointed head of the company welcomed the union to regular conversation, though the union now suspects this has everything to do with a strategic choice on the part of the state in an effort to influence and slowly dismantle the union.

Soon after these victories the union boasted membership in the low thousands, and now claims all 14 thousand have joined. Membership entails signatures of membership, and no fees, though in the future the leadership plans on collecting funds to support its activities. Interestingly, the leadership recognizes the overwhelming

¹²⁰ Anonymous interview. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Summer 2012.

popularity of the independent union, and is considering fielding a candidate in the scheduled June 2013 state union elections, knowing they would win with an overwhelming majority. While the union has not decided what they will choose, there are inherent limitations to either choice. They are weighing sacrificing autonomy for institutional and legal support and a potential alliance with the state. Ultimately, given the wait for parliamentary elections they face strategic difficulties, stating: “we are not optimistic.”

This company’s independent union leadership represented an incredibly different model, in both organizational mechanism, and for the stratification within the firm itself. Thus far there is little structure to the union, though there are talks of having formal positions of leadership. Additionally, the three spokespersons were lawyers, in contrast to the more representative low-wage workers at the helm of many other unions. Midway through the conversation these spokespersons began to talk about conditioning worker behavior; owing to the money lost in the work stoppages. The lawyers outlined their next strategic project as encouraging workers to return to their machines. “They listen to us,” they said. While there were management workers in the transport union, Eastern’s union seemed dominated by lawyers.

This was nowhere more evident than their vision for future diversification of the Eastern Company’s assets. The union leadership is looking into land speculation for cattle and wheat sales. There was very little detail given on this subject, though it seems these plans are not at all in keeping with the interests or plans of the broader

constituency. Though the union has won significant concessions in terms of firm governance, the organization appears particularly anti-democratic.

Informal Vendors

Yet another model of independent union organization is the informal vendors union. These workers have considerably fewer institutional supports than any other union interviewed. The group extends across 7 distinct governorates, coordinated to form one central union. Three spokespeople, all themselves vendors, claimed they organized their union without the intervention of “fancy” people. While this does not deny the relevance of the example set by other unions or coordinators, there is a clear statement on the class and position of groups like the young Revolutionary Socialists; April 6; or any number of their movements of middle class Egyptians helping to organize worker unions.

The operating idea behind this union was there is strength in numbers and pressure in great numbers on the ministry has the greatest chance of creating a permitting structure in the best case, and respect from police at the least. Currently it is rare to find a vendor with a city license anywhere. Furthermore, these workers believe they truly are in the most desperate need for assistance in permitting: “vendors are the poorest people in Egypt” at about 5 to 6 million, each with a family, totaling about 15 million. These workers have organized into 18 market districts around Cairo. Each district has 3 deputies tasked with collecting signatures and recruiting new members. The executive board appoints these deputies, traditionally by age. Each of these

deputies also serves as a spokesperson for their district with the ability to negotiate with other deputies and act as representatives in communications with government.

In planning a structure, they needed to convince the approximately 180 members of their general assembly through campaigns and elections. Members voted for president, deputy, and treasurer for a total of 11 board positions. This union began the registration process on 26 September 2012. Out of respect for their low wages, thus union does not thus far collect fees for membership. Rather these measures are formally postponed until enough members join or their wages are secure enough, on the assumption that the union will negotiate meaningful changes to the nature of their legal standing.

Prior to Mohammed Morsi's victory, the greatest concern facing these vendors was the police who would pursue them, confiscate their merchandise, and impose fines. Between the end of Nasser's regime in 1970 and 1983 no vendor's licenses have been issued to vendors, and all permitting regulation was done under the table. The Mubarak regime auctioned permits for exorbitant sums and vendors with allegiances to Mubarak's National Democratic Party did not face the same scrutiny from police officers as other workers with no permits.

The union has tried to negotiate legalizing the position of vendors, staging multiple protests in front of 6 governorates to demand the halt to a 2012 law imposing harsher fines. Unfortunately the Egyptian vendors union has no allies in the tattered remnants of Egypt's parliament, and though elections are stalled there is little likelihood the workers will find a dependable ally for some time to come. There is a political

committee that reaches out to political forces, seeking solidarity. The union has also sent young members to Suez, for example, to explain the organization and encourage sharing amongst the local unions; “drops create a flood.” I was told these members of the union had formed relationships with many other unions across the country.

In addition there is an education committee that provides vendor skills training on subjects like customer service and negotiating with police. Like many informal groups and associations these workers would so happily pay to become formal, and to contribute taxes. They are well aware of their economic potential. The workers said, if only we could work formally, we would all happily pay a fee, this would help with the country’s debts. These workers are doing their best to convince the country of their potential benefit to the economy.

Not suffering for a lack of grand ambitions, the independent union hopes to develop an organization of the 56 locations where they sell, and to provide pensions from the ministry of labor. This union also hopes to organize a co-operative to negotiate reduce inventory costs and structure revenue sharing with suppliers. Along these lines, there are qualitative controls that welcome any vendor to join, but only so long as they do not sell knives or weapons; good from unknown locations; or fireworks. These goods are too great a liability. They are refused, out of the concern that the actions of one would harm the reputation of many.

This union, more so than the others was motivated out of dire need. The spokesperson said outright: “I know what 10EGP would mean to these people,” but “we can’t wait another 10 to 30 years,” no one knows what their rights are. The strategic

elements of this group are piecemeal, but ambitious overall, recognizing the need for linkages within the formal network of government, and a reconciliation of the precarious relationship to the law.

Popular Response, Political Response

For simplicity's sake, I have stylized levels of impact into scales of governance: at the national, municipal, community and firm levels. Economic disenfranchisement, as seen in Egypt, has led workers to advocate for systemic change in partnership with other cross-sections of civil society. The unions described above operate, primarily in tension with state unions where they exist, and opposition to firm management.

Demands for systemic change are not inherently linked to democratization, but rather material need. While material needs are cast by many journalists and pro-democracy activists as political demands in and of themselves, they elide the articulation of a need for actual political partnerships. Indeed these demands speak to the responsibility of the state and the state's role in setting preferences for particular kinds of industry. Within this frame is a view of social welfare minimums that guarantee a baseline standard of living as a responsibility of the state, in large part informed by the corporatist-socialist compact. Whether or not these are broad political demands, however, they speak less to the mode of governance and more to its outcomes. In fact, the rhetoric of some political actors is tinged with romanticism for Nasser-era notions of centrally coordinated capitalism concerned with distribution and less the participatory nature of the state.

These three unions represent some of the more novel developments in independent union organization in recent years. Though they are not fully representative of the over 1000 unions, they do offer some signals of the changes in social organization strategy. These are supplemented by accounts from other unions as well as journalists covering unions. In addition to crediting Kamal Abo Eitta as a “national symbol for Egypt,” and the tax assessors as providing a model, it is worth noting that many of these union organizers have cited the influence of other independent unions, Egyptian organizations like the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights; The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights; United States NGOs and international poor people’s movements as highly influential.

The young radical Revolutionary Socialists Movement gathered an array of union leadership to attend a meeting before protests marking the anniversary of the January 2011 demonstrations. These meetings reportedly always feature workers to sharing their reasons and strategy in protesting. Participation in these meetings is more or less limited to union leadership, and not rank and file members, though for many groups, these are generally representative spokespersons. The Revolutionary Socialists are acting in a coordinating capacity and bringing multiple accounts together to discuss grievances and strategy. Other coordinating organizations like the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights founded in 2010 offer organizing trainings and support services to unions. This organization is the primary coordinating body, in partnership with the Egyptian Independent Trade Union Federation. The related Hisham Mubarak Law Center was formed out of the legal minimum wage campaign.

At the same time, the spokespersons always, uniformly, ask questions about unions in the United States, or the conditions of work in the analogous sector. There is an intense thirst for knowledge across sectors for strategy from abroad. For example, Eastern workers asked how tobacco workers are treated in the United States. Do they strike often? What are their wages? And who is accountable to these workers when they demonstrate?

Many of these unions referred to their “golden egg,” each describing the particular strategic asset that sets them apart from their contemporaries.¹²¹ The transport workers mentioned their ability to bring Cairo traffic, nightmarish in its own right, to a halt. Cairo’s metro workers, a separate though closely affiliated union trumpeted its ability to shut down the metro, to similar effect. The Eastern Cigarette Company, a hybrid public-private enterprise in western Cairo also claimed that it had stopped traffic by protesting on a large thoroughfare immediately in front of its headquarters. Clearly the media attention garnered by large-scale or large-impact urban labor demonstrations cannot be replicated in the recent suburban industrial developments where there is little traffic to disrupt and fewer media personnel to publicize these demonstrations.

At a more local level, however, there is a demand for the mechanisms of participatory democracy. The overwhelming dissatisfaction with the anti-representative character of state-backed unions is precisely what prompted the formation of independent unions in the first place. Accounts like those of the Eastern Cigarette

¹²¹ Freeman and Medoff. *What do Unions do?*, 1984. p. 7

Company, however, suggest that as the independent unions and their leadership have gained credibility, there may be hope in the reform of the state unions. Currently the leadership of the Eastern Company's independent union is considering fielding a candidate for the leadership of the formal state backed union. This move can be interpreted as a desire to retain a broad base of Eastern company employee support, and work in partnership with the formal institutions of national governance. Eastern Company also signals the limitations to direct local democracy. Worst suspicions are that this union has remained anti-democratic because of the external appearance of a democratic orientation and legitimacy. The union leadership benefits from the local perception of representativeness, and thus far the leadership has engaged in campaigns to root out corruption. The use of union resources to engage in profit generating enterprises outside of the scope of the Eastern Cigarette Company, while operating without a structured and representative leadership is the opposite.

Perhaps most importantly, the vendors feel the betrayal of the "political Islamists" every bit as much as the other unions surveyed. Many critics of independent unions accuse workers as betraying the goals of the revolution, though from the worker's vantage point, the Brotherhood has violated these ambitions. Articles of the new constitution have stipulated significant changes in the state-backed union leadership. Though they are currently governed by representative democracy in rhetoric, new restrictions on firm leadership dictate men over 60 cannot take positions of leadership, and those that are currently elected will be purged and replaced by runner-up candidates. The law further states that where a second-place candidate

cannot fulfill this duty, it will fall to a representative hand-picked by parliament.¹²² This ensures that these ‘formal’ unions retain their intimate relationship with the government, and in the same move dismantles hope that these informal independent unions will be formalized or constitutionally recognized any time soon.

While the union members I spoke to are predominantly Muslim, they have not articulated demands based on religious ideology, though they stated the expectation that the Muslim Brotherhood would have made a strong ally in the formation of government institutions immediately after the revolution. Unions and social organizations of every stripe shared this expectation. It remains to be seen whether or not these unions build on the affronts of the Islamist party currently in power, particularly given the increasingly polarized religious atmosphere. By contrast, the unions may show their true colors, and pursue a strategic relationship with the Islamist government. This seems unlikely from low-wage workers, as they are incredibly hostile to what they view as the betrayal of the revolutionary ideals through the constitutional decree, but other strategic opportunities may yet emerge.

Relatedly, the success of the labor union movement in Egypt since independence experienced the oft-cited pitfalls of co-optation and accommodation by the central government. Literature on the Egyptian transition is heavily laden with references to a “deep state,” capable of swallowing opposition when useful, and brutally repressing it when expedient. Mubarak was considered more so than any other a master at this tactic. The risks to partnering with the Brotherhood are real, particularly for any

¹²² Bashara, Dina. “Who Speaks for Egyptian Workers” *Foreign Policy*. September 6, 2012.

potential alliances with progressive, left-leaning strands of society that view labor unions as critical strategic allies. The easy identification of low-wage workers with the Brotherhood for its charitable activities in poorer neighborhoods poses a serious threat to democratic institutional reform engendered by the working class, though it remains to be seen which way the tide will turn.

Public Perception

Perhaps the greatest partners and significant threat to these independent unions are journalists. One particular journalist responded to the request for an account of why labor action is so sporadic in nature with utter incredulity. This writer explained there appear to be periods of intense union activity, followed by victories and/or lapses in in activity, but in reality labor demonstrations in different parts of the country have continued unabated for years, though many of them are never brought to the public consciousness, particularly those in less urbanized, less populated centers.

Naturally the relationship with the media is double edged. The work of these movements and newly established independent labor organizations has been countered with challenges to “push the wheel of work” by the government and military, and translated into conservative media. This same appeal echoes verbatim the words of Sadat’s October Working Paper, wherein he appeals to the Egyptian public to “push forward the wheel of work at full capacity.”¹²³

¹²³ Sadat, Anwar. “The October Working Paper, Presented by President Mohamed Anwar El Sadat, April 1947.” P. 56; this paper, discussed extensively in a prior chapter

Televised news coverage is markedly more conservative in its harsh assessment of independent union corruption, while a crop of more or less independent liberal print sources existed until Spring 2013. The state media apparatus has worked quite hard to undermine the public perception of unions. Where workers appeal to solidarity of one sort, elites at the helm of Egypt's government appeal to a different kind of economic solidarity, and mutual responsibility sharing. The work being done by Egyptian labor evidences exercises democratic organizational structure in some locations and the use of collective action through quasi- or anti-democratic means to achieve local and macro governance and wage outcomes in others.

Interesting, another potential allies of the independent unions are the administrative courts. The tussle over control of the national government has played out as much in the constitutional court. Nationalization of some firms has recently become a significant point of political pressure. Mubarak engaged in the sale of many formerly public industries in 1990s at prices well below market value. The undervaluing of enterprises in these sales are public knowledge, and as such rhetoric around Nasser's appropriation of foreign firms in the 1960s has gained popularity. There are current demands for renationalization of some industries, and most recently several department stores have come under public management. By and large these renationalizations are taking place through administrative court rulings related to the corrupt sale of industries. Calls for more renationalization, signal an interest in coordinating the health of the economy, and in promoting worker livelihood, though

offers the ideological justification for a particular model of "free trade" oriented development.

this rhetoric could not more removed from the legislative actions of the central government. At present these moves are uncoordinated, and activists' calls for the government to engage systematically to regain control of particular segments of the market is nothing short of reactionary and perhaps naïve given the current political and economic climate. If nothing else, though, these rulings point to a significant source of tension between the central economic and financial quarters of the government and the courts,¹²⁴ and one that has the potential to serve the interests of workers.

In partnership with the media, a host of laws exist criminalizing labor action. Though the government has not usually acted on these laws, there is clear messaging that workers face civil risks should they choose to strike, and where firms have chosen to dismiss striking workers, there is no legal recourse that could help former employees achieve reinstatement.¹²⁵ The unions mentioned above, particularly the informal vendors, evidence a striking awareness of the limitations to worker action without engagement with the apparatuses of formal government. Unfortunately this has manifested less in a campaign of political action, but rather a sense of disillusionment with the current and likely future candidates.

Finally, the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility has made a popular resurgence in the wake of the revolution and response to union action. In fact the Eastern Cigarette Company's website outlines a desire to foster a "culture of co-

¹²⁴ "Cabinet to Challenge Renationalization of Cotton Company" *Egypt Independent*. December 20, 2011 <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/cabinet-challenge-renationalization-cotton-company>

¹²⁵ Charbel, Jano. "Independent unions declare new alliance." *Egypt Independent* December 15, 2012.

operation and benevolence...and develop religious and social value among the Egyptian people..."¹²⁶ The human resources details list a vast number of recipients of the company's philanthropic largesse. At a conference attended in Summer 2012 the language of corporate social responsibility was widely touted as the panacea for shortcomings in the social safety nets provided by the central government though realistically, there seem to be little returns for low-wage workers.

The fundamental frustration cited time and again with independent labor unions cited by middle class media and political activists is that they have not articulated political demands. As I have argued, their material demands argue the state macro-economy should safeguard the well-being of its citizens. While this is a political demand, there are legitimate complaints about strategy and the formation of partnerships with firms or the central government, which these unions generally have eschewed. This frustration conflates political demands for the "correct" explicitly pro-democratic political demands. The increasingly cool relationship between independent labor unions and radical socialist groups, was once facilitated by an instrumentalist mutual benefit between training and organizational resources and attention to protest numbers from the political-media apparatus and genuine interest in governance reform. These groups are not at odds, per se, but there is an urgent need to problematize the easy categorization between unions and liberal political activism. The same mistake was made with the Muslim Brotherhood. Opposition autocracy is not in and of itself the

¹²⁶ "Eastern Company S.A.E.: About us: Social Responsibility" Accessed April 30, 2013. http://www.easternegypt.com/en_site/Environment%20&%20Society.html

making of a unified and sustainable partnership or social movement. Even within both the independent unions and the Muslim Brotherhood there are points of divergence, and some unions do indeed espouse radical left politics, while others are far more conservative, as the three cases seem to be. Though they push for improved governance and the removal of corruption it is less out of a desire to see a more robust Egyptian state, or one governed by substantive procedural democracy, but instead an interest in fair remuneration at the local, firm level. El-Mahdi's reference to the negative attention drawn to 2008 demonstrations by young activists makes this dynamic painfully clear, though both pro-democracy activists and the labor union have significantly capitalized on the popular sentiment expressed in the wake of the episode.¹²⁷

In sum, these changes these unions are enacting are multi-directional, and evolving. A discussion of institutional change hinges intimately on social movement theory and an interest in political opportunity structures that allow movements to access particular leverage points within the network of local communities, firms, municipality, governorate and national government. As evidenced by the discussion above, all of these scales have felt the impacts of this new form of union organization to varying degrees, though the majority of the new 1000 independent unions have generally adhered to more conservative material demands, though these demands are not unrelated and not without impact on the constellation of relationships as formal as those with the central government and unions, culture within firms between management and workers, and those between workers to one another.

¹²⁷ Again, I speak not out of a moral view that this is good or bad, so much a necessity of strategic social organization.

Layered over these dynamics are relationships between social movements, and relationships between unions. Surprisingly, institutions subject to the demands of workers extend as far beyond the local scope of firms to the IMF. Although this is largely speculative, one journalist interviewed claimed the leadership of the Egyptian Independent Trade Union Federation met with officers from the IMF, taking the new institution as quite a legitimate force within the network of broader governance institutions. The institutions unions are trying to leverage for change include the macro-state organizations, such as the executive, and legislative bodies, and related ministries, like that of Manpower and Industry. There are relationships to external institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF, but those are largely constituted through the intermediary of the national government.

It remains to be seen whether or not strategic alliances do indeed form within the formal government bodies, or if unions are left to enact social change on a localized level. Likely, though, the days of labor demonstrations relegated to the realm of quiet acts of subversion continue, but are complemented by large scale organized demands. As many have said, the Pandora's box of collective action amongst working class Egyptians has been opened, it will be nearly impossible to close it again. Ultimately this analysis posits the Muslim Brotherhood has been widely credited for winning elections owing to a sophisticated political architecture long in place since the 1950s. By contrast, labor organization has long been a feature of Egyptian politics, and the infrastructure for mass protest has long been in place. Where the workers may not be able to marshal political candidates, they will continue to marshal protest numbers. The Egyptian

government, until it dedicates considerable attention to the distributional effects of economic pursuits in equal step with growth, should prepare itself for a sustained wave of welfare-based demonstrations, with the lingering possibility of class-based violence if not revolution.

MASR GEDIDA: CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE NEW EGYPT

“We also confirm our deep belief in the need to state in the Constitution that Islam is the official religion of the state...and that the principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation, and thus, the application of Sharia in all walks of life’ as it is the source of wisdom and divine mercy, and as a response to the demands of the majority of the Egyptian people who believe that the Sharia is the best method to ensure the reformation of the conditions of our society that will lead it to happiness and progress...”

Freedom and Justice Party Founding Statement

Democratic theory suggests “consolidation of democratic rule rests on growth and distribution of benefits, but also development of political institutions to mediate policy.”¹²⁸ I have situated unions as one politically active intermediary amongst a constellation of civil society actors in the transition period following the 2011 Revolution. Amongst this collection of actors strategic linkages based on malleable identities have emerged. The choice to participate in a union or activist group hinges on a willingness to exercise some claim to the responsibility of the state. At the same time, criticism of union activities frequently appeal to a supreme state-based identity over that of other identity groups. Where independent unions are pushing for changes within firms or from the government, they are similarly drawing on appeals to citizenship or collective responsibility within a subset of the broader Egyptian whole. Thus, there is a murky territory of contestation, with disparate sides leveling claims of anti-nationalist behavior at one another. In more explicit terms, slinging the ultimate insult of betrayal of the values of the revolution.

¹²⁸ Haggard and Kauffman, p. 335

The characterization of Egypt's associational life as a mix of self-interested actors hinges on the potential of groups, particularly unions, to facilitate broader political appeal: "Unions could play a role in the re-energizing of public life, but this is contingent on the ability to articulate grassroots concerns and to reach out to the unorganized."¹²⁹ At present, though unions have instead proved an ideological, and not always willing partner in the creation of alliances between educated middle class liberals and working class strands of the Islamist movement. These disparate movements are leveraging claims of historic disenfranchisement, in a way that speaks to the hollowed legitimacy of the state, but done in a way that is less collaborative and more opportunistic, for better or worse. This has created a circumstance, as Abu-Odeh writes, where the working class stands in a precarious position between an adherence to market hegemony, an anti-representative state union, and the proliferation of Islamist governance.

The origins and legacy of the Egyptian Revolution and the swell of direct actions across the region remains hotly contested, and an expansive and growing literature on the role of social movements in advancing rights claims and effecting change has since proliferated. Many have referred to the explosion of civic engagement, the flowering of democratic organization and aspirations among the educated middle class,¹³⁰ and in this

¹²⁹ Harcourt and Wood. *Unions and Democratic Change*. p. 12

¹³⁰ "[Al Jazeera] was a virtual cheerleader for the Tunisian uprising. But it was slow to cover the January 25 events in Egypt... Since then Al Jazeera has more than made up for lost time, at least until its reporters were arrested and their cameras confiscated on January 30. Mobile phones, which have been used for political mobilization far more than Facebook and Twitter, have been available in Egypt since 1998. Blogs and Facebook have been used for political organizing for several years. On January 28 there was no internet access in most of Egypt, and the mobile phone networks were shut down." Beinín, "Egypt at the Tipping Point?"

telling the material degradation spurring poor and marginal Egyptians to organize collectively. While there are some grains of truth to these accounts they require positioning in historical context, particularly if one is to speculate on outcomes.

The dominant reading of the Egyptian government characterizes it as a “deep state,” controlled at the top by a central leader and comprised of layers of bureaucratic governance loyal to the military and National Democratic Party. Such a totemic view of the state is useful for understanding the enduring influence of the military and the lasting power of the old regime, but at the same time, it is useful to question the iron-clad nature of the Egyptian state, particularly in the face of recurrent shocks from segments of civil society as well as conditions imposed from external actors abroad. An alternate reading suggests: “despite the seeming omnipresence, the reach (let alone the hegemony and legitimacy) of the state remains acutely limited which leaves many free zones which the non-movements can utilize to thrive and be effective.”¹³¹

In writing about the Iranian Revolution, Bayat argues theorizing on the political action of the ‘urban poor’ situates protest in terms of class, but not in terms of some broader organizational or political identity. This could be said of any theory rooted along identity lines, and indeed I argue this has led to the current climate of uncoordinated tension and false assumptions of solidarity between strands of Egypt’s civil society.

There is a crucial aspect to poor-people’s movements that make them distinct from broader social movements,¹³² however, I theorize there is sense urgency to

¹³¹ Bayat, Assef *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 2009. p. 125

¹³² Piven and Cloward. 1978.

collective action among individuals who see their material expectations threatened. Not only did Egyptian poor suddenly view their material conditions as generally precarious, but the sense that they were getting actively worse echoes the sentiments of middle class and all but the wealthiest Egyptian elite. This theory is an interesting point to remarks like Alaa Al-Aswany's on the diversity of protesters in January 2011, suggesting this event was remarkable in overcoming the rigid class structures that guide typical interaction.¹³³ These class structures were eradicated, though, so much as an alliance was forged among Egyptians from disparate walks of life. Social movement theory rejoins, these alliances are usually not enduring, but subject to quick fragmentation upon the accomplishment of a given objective; in this case the fall of Hosni Mubarak has witnessed splintering or strategic claims to solidarity.

While this study has focused on worker identities, attention has been drawn to the gradual process of institutional change that took place as an outcome of events both within and outside of the country. Much has been made of shock and its role in quick institutional change. This reading of social change in Egypt relies on episodic movements that forge alliances along broad based interests. Shocks frequently cited in the coalescence of the 2011 protests include the plans for Gamal Mubarak to succeed his father, a crisis in commodities prices, abuses by the police force, censorship of the press, to name only a few relevant strands. Generally many argue the coincidence of these factors and the protests in neighboring Tunisia sparked nationwide protests

¹³³ Al-Aswany, Alaa. *What Made the Revolution Inevitable*. 2011

during the 18 days, when thousands of Egyptians with previously little in common were united by a shared enemy in the corrupt Egyptian state.

There are risks to this interpretation. Indeed there are elements of truth to a story of grand convergence, however, to view institutional change as an outcome of episodic events triggered by influence from abroad, as many argue, upon those within the country would be to dangerously undervalue the different scales of local power at work and the process of movement identification that built slowly since the days of Nasser. The exogenous, or episodic view however, overlooks the relevance of “incremental endogenous processes”¹³⁴ and government orientations that have ill-positioned the state to weather shock. A succession of corrupt leaders and the choice of developmental model in every bit informed the landscape of incipient conflict preceding the early months of 2011.

To take this view of endogenous processes further, an alternate interpretation suggests social engagement has continued in a quieter, persistent form in response to incremental changes in orientation at varying levels, what Assef Bayat and Samer Shehata refer to as small acts of subversion in the lived experience of Egyptians. This echoes vaguely Bayat’s quiet encroachment of the street thesis, which situates the actions of the urban poor in the Middle East as the potential material of meaningful political change through their daily, lived experience.¹³⁵ At the same time, Bayat cautions against an overly generous reading of social political action, all the more

¹³⁴ Mahoney, James, and Kathleen Thelen. *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. P. 2

¹³⁵ Bayat, Assef. *Life and Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. 2009

relevant since the January revolution has prompted scholars and journalists to see acts of political subversion in day to day lived activity. In a similar vein, Shehata draws on “lolly-gagging” in the work place as an act of subversion against the firm, describing elaborate breakfast and tea time rituals on company time. Depending on degrees of latitude, acts from mundane workplace ritual, to unsanctioned sustained protest can be viewed as actions against the centralized authority of the state, though it is necessary to ask, as Bayat encourages us to do, whether or not these actions take on a decidedly political color, and whether or not they seek to bridge segments of society, or retain stratifications of class and occupation.

This survey references relationships between various civil society actors, and given the early electoral victories of Islamist political parties, it is important to remember the relevance of religion. Religious identity has been central to the state long before 1952 independence and has witnessed re-articulation with each successive administration. Naturally, the current post-revolutionary (2011) phase is no different. Indeed the struggle for political power today has taken a decidedly religious color.

Thus far the making of Egypt’s Revolution rests on disparate movements converging on points of common frustration with the developmental model adopted by the Egyptian Government and centralized political power. The current circumstances bear this out and evidence, if anything, the exacerbation of these dynamics, coupled with an unraveling of these points of commonality. While Egypt’s working class and its constellation of independent union workers have made significant, indeed previously

unimaginable gains, the country will remain in a transitional period for years, if not decades, to come. The past year and a half, since the formal process of elections began have seen the fracturing and redefinition of identities and linkages that were once facilitated by the January 2011 demonstrations. Indeed the current unraveling of Egyptian society has increasingly been articulated as a product of competing religious identities and questions of citizenship.

For many, the election following the January Revolution yielded the “non-choice” between the briefly Mubarak-appointed Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq, and Mohammed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood’s second-choice presidential candidate behind Khairat al-Shater, the wealthy philanthropic businessman.¹³⁶ ¹³⁷ This stylization of the Revolution’s outcomes, for many, signaled an immediate failure, as the corrupt High Election Commission, a black box institutional body representative of the “deep state” in action, and likely controlled by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, disqualified ten potential, and three particularly polarizing but popular candidates.

Amidst calls from young pro-democracy activists for ballot spoiling, Mohammed Morsi managed a narrow win, with 51 percent of votes, against Shafiq’s 49. Islamist parties proved the overwhelming victors, to the shock of many, in the Spring 2012 Parliamentary elections. Despite Morsi’s ceremonial departure from the Muslim Brotherhood’s ranks, he is still a member of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice

¹³⁶ Stacher, Joshua. “Establishment Mursi” *Middle East Research and Information Project*. Issue 265, Winter 2013

¹³⁷ Al-Shater, for many has become an icon of righteous capitalism, though the merger of free-market ideology and philanthropy is a far cry from the distributive policies of Nasser and conditions its morality exclusively on Muslim ideology and strict Sharia law.

Party. A separate and not dissimilar study could be made from the success of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to mobilize politically, given its outlawed status, to establish not only legal recognition, but advancing a candidate capable of winning Egypt's first free election, albeit one undermined by substantive irregularities.

The brotherhood's organizational and political success notwithstanding, there remain great obstacles for worker's struggles under their leadership, where some assumed an easy alliance between the parallel oppositional forces under Mubarak. A 2011 drafted labor law, progressive as it once was, has been picked apart by a Brotherhood-dominated legislature, and had been shelved for further discussion until the ratification of Egypt's new constitution. The practice of ethical, or religiously infused capitalism, it seems, offers little space for worker protection or codification of worker's rights through law. Now that this constitution has been approved there is little discussion of whether or not this draft law will see any attention. Rather it has been replaced by a constitutional decree effectively allowing the brotherhood to hand select the leadership of the state unions, a safeguard in trades where the state and independent coalitions exercise some degree of autonomy or representativeness on behalf of worker demands. Indeed it remains to be seen whether the as yet secular court is capable of furthering its prior ideological considerations for individual rights while fostering trade on open markets.

Relatedly, evidence suggesting a politically strategic approach by the Brotherhood to poorer working classes can be found in the recent issuance of taxes on consumer goods. Despite the insistence of the Freedom and Justice Party, after the

fashion of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak, of its interest in protecting and ameliorating conditions for the poorest Egyptians, this tax would render basic consumer good inaccessible to many. In the face of wide discontent, Morsi retracted his call for such a tax mere days before the first wave of the constitutional referendum in December 2012. The proposed, and many say inevitable tax increase comes largely from the urging of the International Monetary Fund, whose conditional loans still very much represent the dominant logic of macro-stability as the path to individual capability advanced by mid-century economic growth theorists. At the same time Morsi is bound even further by the currency crisis. Talks with the IMF over a much needed 4.8 million dollar loan have stalled since summer of 2012, with current cash-flows coming from regional partners like Qatar and Libya.

Shockingly little recent English-language scholarship of any reputable quality has been done on the Muslim Brotherhood. The victory of Muslim political parties genuinely caught many in a state of shock and worry. The relationship of the Brotherhood to the central Egyptian government and civil society at large is historically fraught, with the Brotherhood occupying a position of long-time outsider, so much so, in fact that the coalition of Islamist groups, like the independent labor unions, operates as its own parallel institutions. In the words of legal scholar Lama Abu-Odeh: "...the Islamic sector sees itself as the alternative to the state," providing support in hospitals, clinics, mosques, and banks. The class stratification is managed and facilitated through the provision of welfare to the poor and investment opportunities to wealthy, going so far

as to offer its own flavor of financial instruments governed by Islamic principles.¹³⁸ As the Islamists offer a parallel state, they also, as Abu-Odeh argues, seek to influence and control the state through participation in elections, and through amassing large fortunes through the endeavors of successful Islamist businessmen, though not unlike labor organizers, throughout the 2000s these successful businessmen were the target of repression, imprisonment, military trials and general persecution by the state.¹³⁹ As Abu-Odeh notes, the Islamists have had great success “in infiltrating the corporatist structures of the middle class,” though they have not had great success participating or engaging with trade unions. Abu-Odeh speculates this may be because of the aversion of the elite class of Islamists to engage with the industrial working class, particularly given the managerial relationship many of these businessmen have with these workers.¹⁴⁰

Like labor, the Brotherhood can be seen as a case in the argument that repression and persecution engender robust organization, though the Brotherhood has managed to translate its aspirations into strategic visioning. To understand the Brotherhood of today there needs to be an appreciation of the incredible stratification of the organization along class lines. In the words of a former Brotherhood member, “The core of the economic vision of Brotherhood, if we are going to classify it in a

¹³⁸ Abu-Odeh, Lama. “On Law and the Transition to Markets” *Emory International Law Review*.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Footnote 120, *Ibid.* p. 367

classical way, is extreme capitalist,”¹⁴¹ though the movement enjoys a broad base of poor urban and rural support for its charitable works and moral religious ideology.

Traditionally the Brotherhood has not suffered from a lack moral high ground, though this is rapidly changing owing to incredibly violent December 2012 and March 2013 conflicts. “The movement’s ideology revolves around cementing the Quran and Islamic teachings as a way of life...;”¹⁴² during disasters the Brotherhood relied on its networks to provide aid, most prominently in the Cairo earthquake of 2009. During the 18 days Brotherhood members marched alongside other cross sections of civil society, all sharing food and shelter alike. The consistent provision of services and persistent orientation and perception as benevolent outsider has structured widespread support for the Brotherhood, though generally, less support than one would believe by the presidential victory of Mohammed Morsi.

While al-Shater emphasizes in the Brotherhood’s vision there is no coercion in the party’s methods, the practice of this group has overseen the closure of movie theaters across the country’s urban areas, the restriction of food service through curfews, and similar small moves geared towards enhancing the religious credentials of the purportedly secular civic state. At the extreme, recent video footage and journalist photographs from late 2012 and early Spring 2013 have shown bearded Islamists, beards being one of the immediate visual cues identifying religious-political ideology,

¹⁴¹ Hansen, Suzy, “The Economic Vision of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Millionaires.” *Bloomberg Businessweek, Global Economics*. April 19, 2012

¹⁴² “Profile: Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/2011/02/201126101349142168.html>

and casually dressed secular youths engaging in combat, be it hand-to-hand, armed, or through improvised means, like Molotov cocktails or wooden staves studded with nails.

The re-creation of oppositional identities is being captured and fueled by conservative-religious, or left-radical media.¹⁴³ Indeed it is a benefit to Egyptian society that free media exists at all, though the divisions are laid bare and the space for discourse is radically polarized. At the same time, these images are transmitted internationally, and with recent accusations of disappearances and targeted assassination, the Brotherhood and military's legitimacy is rapidly eroding.¹⁴⁴ At the same time, many Egyptians are simply exhausted by the clip of large-scale violence and political demonstrations. The sense in Cairo, at least, is that stability at the hands of anyone would be favorable to the protracted, and corrupted path to democratization.¹⁴⁵

The sweeping protests providing these images are largely the product of the constitution passed in late 2012, the delay of Parliamentary elections in early 2013, and the two year anniversary events of January 25th, and the liberal socialist anniversary of April 6. These newly established days of remembrance have come to symbolize the impotence of the liberal ideologies underpinning some facets of the Revolution. However, with recent clashes erupting many are left wondering if the tools of democratic governance, an elected president, legislature, and healthy media are proving

¹⁴³ Translated Muslim Brotherhood news coverage, <http://mbinenglish.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/8/>

¹⁴⁴ The conflation of these two strands speaks again to the theory of a "deep state" with diffused accountability. There is much more that could be said about the theorized black box of Egyptian government.

¹⁴⁵ This is the exact sentiment espoused by many within the labor movement particularly, in their neo-Nasserist ideology.

to be a curse and have engendered a second wave of revolution, if it can be said the first ever ended.

Transition weariness and its conservatizing effect are well underway. The splintering of once collective identities now seems more evident than ever. Though many Egyptians lament the bias and inefficacy of Mohammed Morsi, there is little agreement on which alternative political leaders could better navigate the current crisis. Labor demonstrations are ongoing at a healthy rate, though the frustrations aimed at the institutions of the national government are halted until Parliamentary elections take place, and there seems little hope of that soon. Most recently Mohammed Morsi has declared a halt to the privatization of publicly operated firms. Whether or not this is a credible promise to protect the work-livelihoods of Egyptians employed in these sectors, or more cynically is an effort to suppress labor action through rhetorical shifts remains to be seen.

While the political and rhetorical battles wage on, the expansion of industry and population in the desert continues. Those who can, move to wealthier suburbs, while others locate to satellite communities of the sub-urban poor. All the while the wheel of the economy continues to turn.

CONCLUSION

States are the product of their histories. This is neither a claim of path dependency, nor do I purport to absolve the central state of responsibility for its choices. Indeed the story of Egypt since independence is one of measured agency: “States must be regarded as intuitions and actors in their own right, influencing the course of economic and social change, even as they are shaped by it.” This thesis is a study in this dynamic, if only for the inroads it makes at trying to understand and loosely theorize on the dynamic between the Egyptian state and society over the past half-century. While the state will remain contested for years to come, it is important to consider the role social movements, particularly newly independent workers’ movements, have played in the articulation of ‘Revolutionary’ demands.

There is a clear normative agenda to this project. My aim is to suggest the pursuit of a particular kind of “modern” economic growth created a situation in which Egyptian citizens, and workers in particular, were left with a significant shortfall in their ability to cover the basic costs of commodities. It has become commonplace to assume subsidies, once in place, can never be dismantled lest the central government face fierce opposition from movements by the urban poor and working classes. While this is not strictly true, unless there is a distributional orientation in the pursuit of economic growth there are little prospects for Egypt, or any nation, to enjoy the benefits of development, defined in any number of ways, without the regular occurrence of political protests driven by need or the sense of betrayal of the expected outcomes of productive work.

I have translated the dominant narrative of direct action featured in the popular consciousness of labor organizers today. This history has been punctuated by dramatic change in recent years triggered by a deteriorating standard of living. Though this segment of Egyptian social movements has always served as a potent force exerting pressure on the central government, local institutions, and even international actors, they have done so within a milieu of broader social movements and in response to a march of central development plans. The 2011 Revolution saw the collapse of some of the boundaries around identity politics that had kept these movements separate. Though the linkages that were facilitated are now tested, perhaps to the breaking point.

In the space of the transition many movements have articulated a position of self-interest, as one would expect, however these positions may not necessarily be in keeping with the assumptions or desires of their once allies. The articulation of self-interest should not be surprising, nor should it necessarily be treated as a damning indictment of the quality of these movements. Self-interest is the primary incentive to collective action in the first place, and many of these groups have participated in advancing an agenda defined around their political identities for anywhere from 5 to 100 years.

Given the incredible divisions along class lines, as witnessed in segregated cities, the only robust democracy will entail the continued existence of a robust civil society. The alliance between labor, Islamist activists and the pro-democratic intellectual class has splintered in such a way that the relationship between labor and pro-democratic forces has cooled, each recognizing the limitations in the other's interests. On the other

hand, the Brotherhood has evidenced an aversion to the cause of labor. Again, the intense stratification between the wealthy capitalist class of Brotherhood leadership and poor or working class Brotherhood members cannot be ignored. Some of the independent union leadership and many more general workers identify as Brotherhood members themselves. These individuals are living the overlap of class and religious ambitions, though for many it has become increasingly clear that the Brotherhood, as a political party espouses aspirations of economic growth with few assurances for wealth distribution. The Brotherhood could easily have relied on its prior alliances, after the fashion of Mubarak, accommodating or providing for workers, though it has increasingly shown it has little interest in pursuing this option.

Many posited the mediating pressure of political responsibility upon the radicalism of Islamists, though if anything, they have shown a proclivity for the opposite. Until substantive democratic elections are achieved, it will fall to the working class to advance its own interests, pursuing, as it has, manifold strategies and opportunities as they arise. There is a great deal of truth to Piven and Cloward's assertion of the urgency felt by poor people's movements, for while there may be conflicts of interest, I have no doubt the trade unions in Egypt will continue to demonstrate, bargain and push against the state and against the owners of capital for their basic needs of food, housing and work with dignity to be met. In fact, a tripartite division of power offers a contrary reading of the discourse that has emerged in the popular media and most analysis of the revolutionary and transitional period. Abu-Odeh cannot be echoed enough: labor has found itself between the rock and hard place of religious, Islamist discourse; the

exercise of capitalism; and the calls for a new democratic state. Until this incredibly active and vocal population is recognized in the popular consciousness as an equal counterweight, capable of the same kinds of state-making initiatives and energy as the Brotherhood and pro-democracy movements, workers will be trapped in the realm of centrally coordinated capitalist production that leaves their material concerns at the margin of broader development discourse, though that will not stop them from acting and gaining attention from the state.

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