THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

REPORT WORLD

New Neighborhood Power

Informal Popular Committees and Changing Local Governance in Egypt

FEBRUARY 7, 2017 — CILJA HARDERS AND DINA WAHBA

After the uprising of 2011, new forms of political participation emerged, among them the popular committees (lijan sha'abiyah). Initially convened mainly to ensure security at the neighborhood level, the committees came to life after the withdrawal of police forces from the public in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Port Said, and many towns of the Nile Delta. After the initial eighteen days of the Egyptian revolution, the popular committees expanded their activities and, in different ways in different places, became vehicles to advocate for local needs through informal and formal channels. To a limited degree, the committees gave voice to groups and individuals that had been marginalized. Drawing on original fieldwork in several neighborhoods of Cairo and Giza, the authors argue that the committees embody a new form of political participation in Egypt, which has endured despite the country's sharp return to authoritarianism. Although the committee are varied and imperfectly democratic, they are a dividend of the revolution that will continue to be relevant in Egypt's political future.

In the night of January 28, 2011, as police forces retreated from the public after massive attacks on police stations all over Egypt, an unprecedented form of local political organization was born.[1] Residents in both poor and rich areas of Cairo and other cities drew on their neighborhood networks to form so-called "popular committees." The groups' first and foremost aim was safeguarding their lives and assets under circumstances of extreme uncertainty and the threat of repression.

Some two weeks later, at the end of the eighteen days of the Tahrir Square uprising,[2] the popular committees immediately began taking quite different paths, leading to a huge variety of local activism.[3] They changed in tune with the major developments on the national level. New committees emerged, some of the original ones continued—often in new forms and with new goals—and still others disbanded. Some embraced formal politics while others eschewed them; some were explicitly revolutionary and others service-oriented. Youth initiatives, local media outlets, and formally registered development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) emerged from the committees. Some groups built close relationships with the security establishment, while others kept a distance.[4] Later, some of them engaged intensively in the "tamarrod" (rebellion) campaign against Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, and turned into active supporters of the then-minister of defense, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Others stayed away from such activism on the national scale.

But the military takeover in summer of 2013 put a chill on the dizzying array of activities the committees had become involved in, as even local politics became increasingly difficult. These difficulties frustrated many, but also encouraged others to soldier on, using the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2015, for example, as occasions to go public again for local grievances.

At the end of 2016, we conducted extensive interviews with people involved and affected by the popular committees, and, drawing on many years of previous research in the neighborhoods in which they are most active, sought to better understand their roots, their history since the January 25 revolution, and their current status and trajectory. What we found were committee members torn by frustration and fear in light of heavy and arbitrary repression of any civic action. Still, some continued their activities, while looking for a meaningful way to frame their circumstances.

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“When we established the neighborhood committee, our aim was to take the revolution out of Tahrir Square and bring it to our neighborhood,” an Egyptian activist in his fifties reflected, while sitting in a coffee shop in one of Cairo’s poor-to-middle-class neighborhoods in 2016. “After 2013 everything changed, we were targeted and deconstructed,” he added later, after we had talked about the political work of the past five years, its ups and downs, its victories and bitter moments. “The network we created was hit by deep divisions, arrests and a deep sense of frustration among everyone. But still there’s hope. The most important result of the revolution is that people raise their voice. They speak out and they will not stop.”[5]

In this report, rather than focusing on the national and formal level of political change, we propose to use our research to understand the state from below—from the perspectives of those who shaped local politics in mostly informal ways. Looking at the local dynamics of political participation is highly productive for policymakers and scientists alike. It allows us to understand resistance and acquiescence to the powerful political, economic and social structures that shape ordinary people’s lives. Such an analysis of the state from below understands local spaces to be contested testing grounds for changing state-society relations. Thus, the local scale is also important for policy-interventions, as target groups and their needs can be identified more easily, and the results often materialize more quickly and are more tangible. The local arena is of course not a void sphere, in which domestic or foreign policymakers and activists can easily intervene. It is, we argue, as fraught with power structures, conflicts of interest, competition, and indeed authoritarianism as it is a space of resistance and hope.

In their studies, Jennifer Bremer, Hatem Hassan, and Asya El-Meehy already hint at the ambivalent qualities of the committees. El-Meehy argues that they were neither entirely democratic nor fully inclusive.[6] Our data also indicate that the internal dynamics of popular committees have contained many contradictions, most prominently between older and

younger people, between men and women and between rich and poor. Many activists have sought to challenge class hierarchies, the disrespect of women, and the devaluation of the young. But we find that translating their criticism into new practices was daunting. This is partly the case because the groups were deeply rooted in existing social and political structures. Their members built them on the networks they already had access to, such as those provided by family, friends, neighbors, and work. By tapping into existing networks, the committees were able to quickly take on some of the responsibilities of the state as its agencies broke down. However, this also meant that they inherited some of the problems of the informal social contract that had evolved in the poisonous context of authoritarianism. But the committees are also spaces for new people testing new ways of doing politics. The sheer number of groups that came to life after the eighteen days of uprising in 2011 makes for a substantial change in the local political landscape.

Our data show that the revolutionary moments and transformative events the Egyptian people have lived through since 2011 created new political spaces. Much of this happened on the local level and in informal ways—among them, the popular committees. Rather than asking whether the revolution failed, we look at the long-term impact of the mass uprising of 2011. Our approach thus dovetails with that of other analysts and the perspectives of many of our interview partners, who see important processes of change beyond the level of landed elites and formal institutions. The fact that people protested en masse and brought down Hosni Mubarak (president from 1981 to 2011) is an important achievement. This experience of empowerment cannot be erased, and in many ways it was highly productive: it changed the perceptions and the actions of social and political actors. After years of acquiescence, they spoke out and used the committees to struggle both for a better life and to have a voice. These processes then, feed into new political subjectivities, which are more inclusive, and less patriarchal and authoritarian—as many of our interview partners and academics have suggested, including Hania Sholkamy, Asef Bayat, Sari Hanafi, Mohamed Bamyeh, and Samuli Schielke.[7] At the same time, the committees should not be romanticized as spaces of popular resistance. Rather, we see them as highly ambivalent spaces, in which the old notions of appropriate gender, age, and class-relations are sometimes accommodated and sometimes challenged.

In order to substantiate our claims, we conducted qualitative fieldwork and spoke to activists in the Cairo and Giza neighborhoods of Umraneya, Boulaq Abu Eila, Boulaq Dakrour, Maspero, Dokki, Bassatin, Dar al-Salam and Agouza. For the safety of our informants, in the following narrative, we will withhold names and any information that could compromise their anonymity. Still, a brief introduction of some more general features of the Cairene and Giza neighborhoods in which we worked can give some context. Most of them are socially diverse, but tend to be lower- to middle-class areas. Some of them are part of historical Cairo, but many others have only been built up since the 1970s due to the heavy influx of migrants from rural Egypt. Most neighborhoods have a lively and bustling market area or street, some of them old and famous, which attracts visitors from other parts of the town. Often, the communities include an old section (mostly the old village, which existed before the city expanded into the area), which is often especially poor

and run-down. The neighborhoods are considered by their inhabitants and other Cairenes alike to be "sha'abi"—popular. This often means that the streets are narrow, the buildings have been erected without official permission or regard for building codes, and public services are limited or of bad quality. But on the other hand, people have a strong sense of ownership and community, neighborly networks are closely knit, and people tend to support each other. In comparison to more "modern" or wealthy parts of the city, where people move anonymously, the urban environment in these sha'abi neighborhoods enables community action.[8] The quarters are politically diverse. Some of them are known for the conservative leanings of their inhabitants, whereas others are traditional strongholds of certain political parties for various reasons, such as being the original home of a party leader.

In addition, some of the neighborhoods with desirable locations have experienced intense pressure, with threats of evictions and speculation on land. A famous example is the Maspero neighborhood surrounding the eponymous riverside building that serves as the headquarters of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union. The neighborhood was frequently the site of protests and violent clashes in 2011 and 2012. Maspero residents have long contested the constant attempts to evacuate them and sell their highly attractive plots on the banks of the Nile to investors. Moreover, most buildings in Maspero are very old and in bad shape to the point of being unsafe. But the government has not offered any reconstruction or development services, in the hopes that the inhabitants might leave due to the bad circumstances.

In this report, we first place some of these dynamics in the broader context of political transformation after January 25, 2011. Next, we delve into the political context of prerevolutionary Egypt's authoritarian social contract, before analyzing the popular committees in more depth, showing how they have both challenged and accommodated the authoritarian social contract. We specifically look at gender, class, age, and the interplay of formal and informal organizations. We conclude with a handful of policy recommendations that could make the most of the enduring political promise that the committees hold—even as politics at the national level may appear ever more discouraging.

Contextualizing Cairo's Neighborhood Committees

Usually, when political scientists talk about the role of the state, they assume that formal institutions and political elites determine how public services are delivered and contribute to the welfare and security of citizens.[9] We use a different approach to examine the dynamic between society and the state, which places a lot more importance on local power struggles and the social contract. This approach, known as "state analysis from below," allows us to focus on the agency of marginalized groups, and to understand how their local actions relate to broader trends and structures.[10] A perspective "from below" focuses on poor, excluded, or marginalized communities. The "local space" is a small-scale place such as a

neighborhood or a community. It is not defined only in administrative ways, such as being a voting district or a city district. The meanings and boundaries of a neighborhood are also linked to how the inhabitants use the space and define its limits.

Power relations become tangible on the local scale. Abstract concepts such as "the state," "governance," or "politics" take concrete form when looked at through the eyes of ordinary citizens. The state is more than a set of formal institutions. We take it to be an arena of power struggles, which constitute "politics." Usually, political science takes voting behavior and membership in organizations to be the most relevant forms of political participation. But this often does not matter for ordinary people in Cairo. They opt for other, less visible, often informal ways of doing things. Participation then includes many activities: informal, individual, hidden, illegal, and nonpolitical actions and networks. But even the informal politics are not open to everybody in the same way. Access to resources depends on one's gender, class, ethnicity, or religious creed. Elderly middle-class men dominate many political spaces in Egypt.[11]

Politics is structured according to certain rules, which some political scientists call the social contract. This means that there is an unwritten deal between rulers and the ruled. In Egypt since the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser, this deal meant swapping independent political voice for access to welfare. This social contract was authoritarian in nature and it changed over time as the welfare state became weaker and services diminished. Under Mubarak, it turned into a "social contract of informality." Informality became a distinctive feature of state-society relations since before the turn of the twenty-first century. It first became tangible when Cairo and other cities began to grow substantially and informally and the so-called informal settlements (ashwa'iyyat) began to spread.[12] Especially in poor-to-lower-middle-class neighborhoods, informal family and neighborhood networks were constantly used for organizing saving and housing. People built on these relations of trust and reciprocity for the collective or individual appropriation of public resources. For example, people dug wastewater canals in order to keep their neighborhood clean. They appropriated electricity by branching from stations, and they squatted on land or built homes without official permission. As early as 1997, Asef Bayat described these practices as a massive, visible, and informal "nonmovement," which he called the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary."[13] It is through these individual actions, that "ordinary people change the Middle East."[14] The aim of these acts of open, everyday resistance was simply the improvement of living conditions, not the direct delegitimizing of state authority. Many other dimensions of life became informal, too. School students and even university students were drawn into a system of officially illegal private tutoring in order to finish their educations. Patients needed to pay for food, medication, and doctors' attention while being officially treated in public hospitals. The formal transportation system of the city did not reach out to the growing settlements, and people established informal services, among them the infamous cheap motorized rickshaw taxis called tuk-tuks. This in turn was linked with police corruption and racketeering. For the rich, informal spaces of action often allow for individual enrichment and corruption. Even though these modes of action were not completely new to the Egyptian state-society relations, their

degree and scope decisively increased during the last twenty years. In this "social contract of informality," the state offers space for informal types of agency and participation rather than citizenship rights and a functioning welfare system, and it still expects loyalty and political demobilization.[15]

But the formal and the informal, the local and the national are closely linked. Informal appropriation of resources is based on the state's tacit toleration of these practices. And state agencies turn a blind eye to such practices because they cater to pressing needs in a market-oriented way and compensate for the weaknesses of the state and its lack of services. In addition, state agencies often lack the capacity to control and prevent these activities. But at the same time, police and courts have the last word on who can use informal spaces and who cannot, using violence in order to keep people in place. Often, the poor are the most vulnerable to such actions: street vendors are raided and their goods confiscated. They need to bribe the police in order to get their property back. Police officers especially harass and intimidate young men of the sha'abi quarters.[16]

In the social contract of informality, rights and claims of citizens are replaced by hard-to-regulate possibilities of informal action within informal organizations and institutions. But even this deal is embedded in the web of citizens' expectations concerning minimal service delivery. As the Egyptian state cannot cater to these expectations in the long run, the social contract of informality also generates a long-term crisis of legitimacy, as citizens are increasingly aware of the lopsidedness of the contract. Such a crisis of legitimacy, in addition to rising activism, a deepening economic crisis, and massive state violence were crucial in bringing about the uprising of January 25, 2011. When protesters shouted, "The people want the downfall of the system," they were quite aware that substantial change would require more than a new president. We hold that they claimed their right to renegotiate the social contract and to change their relationship with state institutions.

In and of itself, the mass mobilization of January and February 2011 represented a major shift in the framework of an authoritarian and repressive system. Rather than showing fear in the face of repression, citizens took to the street in order to fight for "bread, freedom, and social justice." This revolutionary experience politicized a previously demobilized population, and thus brought forth new political subjectivities. More than six years after the revolution, this change seems to be less tangible, because the authoritarian social contract and its main logics are back full force. After the "coup-volution"[17] that unseated Mohamed Morsi in 2013, and in the wake of the Rabaa and al-Nahda mass killings in the summer of that year, the Egyptian government declared a "war on terror" on the Muslim Brotherhood. This was followed by a massive wave of repression, a new rigid protest law, unprecedented cases of mass death sentences, widespread torture, arbitrary detention, and disappeared detainees. There have been vicious campaigns against human

rights organizations and activists, raids on offices and, overall, a continuously narrowing public space. These developments on the national scale had strong repercussions on local politics. But at the same time, as our data show, neighborhood activism continues.

Committees as Security Provider

When the popular committees came to life on the night of January 28, 2011,[18] they were a mostly urban phenomenon, crossing class boundaries: neighborhood committees were set up in rich and poor areas alike. They were predominantly male. Citizens took over police functions in securing the lives and assets in the face of real and imagined insecurity. Umm Hassan of an informal settlement recounted: "When we heard about the events on Tahrir and about the burning of police stations, the men of our street went out in order to protect us. But nothing really happened. The people who were really scared were our Christian neighbors. They felt threatened. But nothing happened. And after the eighteen days, we all went back home and the committee stopped."

TAHRIR – PROTESTS IN TAHRIR SQUARE ON FEBRUARY 25, 2011© FLICKR/INTAL

Enrique Klaus, in the anthropological account of his participation in the committee of his neighborhood, El Manial, tells a similar story.[19] People were afraid of thieves and "baltagiyya" (thugs), but more often than not, there were no criminal incidents. Some big supermarkets were looted in more affluent areas, which were located at the outskirts of Alexandria and Cairo. But all the lootings happened in areas with no neighborhood communities around them, whereas in other urban settings, foreign and local businesses alike were protected by the committees.[20]

The fear of thugs is a recurrent theme, which gained much prominence in local and national public discourses alike. Thugs were known as criminals who also supplemented police and state security before 2011, and were regularly deployed during election times when the open use of police would have belied the democratic façade.[21] The thugs, who

operate using local networks in the places they come from, have also been integrated in various activities in the gray zone between criminality and informality. In his in-depth study of the neighborhood committees in Alexandria, Ahmed Saleh argues that, in the days after the uprisings, as fear about thugs and rumors of escaped prisoners gripped the city's neighborhoods, committees assumed a broad array of police-like behavior, including very violent treatment of alleged perpetrators.

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Committees checked identification and opened car trunks just like the police. Some even used untrained street dogs in order to stage searches for drugs. Others set up an umbrella under which a leader would sit and have the identification cards of suspects brought to him. At this time, criminals and police forces were the main targets of such activities. Many committees issued passes and carried badges. Their activities, argues Saleh, amounted to a curfew on the police, changing the balance of power in favor of the revolutionaries. "After the army decided not to attack Tahrir, the police remained the only force willing to do so," he writes. The police force was "forced to withdraw on January 28, and the [popular committees] prevented it from even considering regrouping or remobilizing."[22]

As for gender relations, the committees were almost exclusively male, even though women contributed in the framework of traditional gender roles—bringing food and drinks to the men in the street, helping with communication, and with encouraging "their men" to be strong and daring. In addition, women were also wary of the committees as they impeded their freedom to move, be it in the neighborhood or in the vicinity of Tahrir. Often, they did not know the men who claimed to be of the quarter and were questioning women on the move, chaperoning them into "adequate" behavior.

People in Tahrir Square also set up popular committees in order to protect themselves from attacks and infiltration by the state security apparatus. The committees also organized the daily needs of those occupying the square: they distributed food and medication, managed the division of labor, and served as communication hubs. On the square, some of the old boundaries were torn down. Committees included women as well as men, poor as well as rich. The relationship of the square with the neighborhoods around it was ambiguous, however. Thugs and other pro-regime forces who controlled some areas tried their best to prevent supporters from reaching the square. Other groups were proud of their support to the square, as this member of a neighborhood committee in the vicinity of Tahrir recounted: "Our role

during the Friday of rage on January 28, 2011 was to facilitate the mission of the people who wanted to reach Tahrir Square. We are considered the center and anyone who wants to reach the square has to pass through here, and the police were hammering us. We were helping the people to get there and telling them about alleys and other streets they could go through so that they didn't get lost."[23]

Thus, the popular committees took over security functions on the local scale during critical periods of mass mobilization in January and February 2011. The experience led to closer social relationships even in neighborhoods that were not traditionally closely knit. As a result, some of these new networks served as resources for activism after the eighteen days of revolution. But as Saleh rightly points out, as much as the committees influenced the balance of power, they did not challenge the politics of the army, and except for some in Tahrir, they maintained traditional class, property and gender relations.

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Reclaiming Politics from Below

The breakdown in the winter of 2011 of the barrier of fear—or, as detained activist Alaa Abdel Fattah pointed out in a recent, very sad letter from prison, the breakdown of the "barrier of despair"[24]—encouraged many newcomers to the formal and informal political scenes, including youth, women and the urban poor.[25] Many people engaged for the first time in local activism, and thus, intentionally or not, challenged the old authoritarian social contract while claiming their right to have a voice. A youth activist recounted: "As a popular committee we had three main goals: to foster community participation, to establish popular monitoring of local government, and trying to create alternative media."[26] A resident of a different neighborhood said that activists "wanted to bring the revolution" to their quarter. "Now, finally, we can implement plans to make the neighborhood cleaner and better," a female head of a development NGO said. "We had these plans for years, but the authorities did not listen to us."[27]

The popular committees, even though they all carry the same name, represent a broad variety of people, ideas, and actions. They all share a sense of local empowerment and, at least in 2011 and 2012, all possessed a huge sense of enthusiasm. They all focus on local issues, using different strategies in reaching out to their areas' inhabitants and to the authorities. Some of them developed close affiliations with formal political organizations such as parties; others were careful to stay away from such a stand. A previous history of confrontation with the state—for example, if residents of an

informal settlement had in the past been threatened with eviction—impeded some groups, while others started anew, with no legacy to carry. Overall, the sheer amount and variety of activism in the first two years after the January 25 revolution make generalizations difficult. We further wish to complicate the picture by looking into the renegotiation of the class, gender, and age structures of the authoritarian social contract. These struggles shaped dynamics within the committees and between the groups. They also affected the relationship between committees and more formalized actors such as parties or local bureaucracy.

Between Social Issues and "Real Politics"

Political dynamics on the national scale led to a surge in the foundation of new political parties, and a massive pluralizing of the political field. But local activism, especially in poorer neighborhoods, had to confront the many supply crises that deeply affected people's daily lives and which shaped the groups' work. To mention but a few: the cooking gas crisis, the rubbish-collection crisis, the constant power cuts of 2013 in the run-up to the coup, and the 2016 crisis in access to sugar and baby milk. Lack of services came with ever-rising prices of basic commodities since 2011. Thus, people got organized in order to make sure that they got the supplies they needed. Especially in the cooking gas crisis, many women were mobilized and saw this as a legitimate cause to enter the public sphere and demand their rights.

Another major issue that came up in the interviews was the lack of garbage collection even though people had paid their fees. Committees used their newly created local media outlets and social media to spread awareness and pressure the local administration to talk action. With glowing pride, poor and less-poor people recounted stories of confronting corrupt and arrogant civil servants, who would normally refuse to even talk to them even though they were legally responsible for catering to the people of their district. "We went to the building of our district's administration. We confronted them with our demands," said a woman from a poor neighborhood in Cairo who talked about this new and empowering experience after the uprisings. "We were loud! And can you imagine that these people really talked to us? They never did that before. But after the revolution, they were afraid."[28]

More than one initiative in Giza mobilized inhabitants to collect their garbage and throw it on the steps of the governor's office. By mobilizing publicly, the local inhabitants gained voice and were able to exert pressure on the authorities to either finally implement projects they had approved years ago, or to react to the grievances of the inhabitants. According to our research, this included getting access to the gas network of the city, getting streets redone, having illegal garbage dumps removed, planting trees, restoring public recreation spaces, and setting up a new local library and a small youth center. However, local groups were rarely visited or supported by any of the national political leaders, members of parliament, or members of political parties on the national level, and thus felt let-down by the more formal political

actors. “None of those political parties even thought of creating legal units to support the causes of certain poor neighborhoods,” a party member and youth activist self-critically confirmed. “They don’t engage with people’s everyday lives and their problems. For example, women in these neighborhoods have issues with alimony and divorce cases and they should have gotten support with the problems that matter to them. Men have problems with pensions, arbitrary suspensions, and other issues that [the parties] should help with. And this doesn’t need much resources.”[29]

Still, in 2011 and 2012 other NGOs and many young middle-class activists from outside the neighborhoods tried to cater to these needs, tried to support local organizations in order to spread a new consciousness and help people voice their concerns. But they were also frustrated with the often service-oriented attitude of the poor and the way that other political forces exploited this focus on services. “They are giving the people the fish, we want to teach them how to fish,” a youth activist pointed out in 2012 when discussing the difference between his committee’s work and the charity work of the Muslim Brotherhood. “Our aim is to teach people their rights and help them to claim their rights rather than ask for services.”[30]

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The activist’s attitude speaks to the very valid concept of empowerment, but at the same time, it also underestimates the pragmatism of local actors. It does not take into consideration people’s capacity and need to accommodate their circumstances rather than engage in lengthy legal contestations. The young, middle-class activists with no background in the sha’abi quarters they entered to help also underestimated the social stratification within neighborhoods and the competing interests of different inhabitants, which often came to the fore when property and housing rights were concerned.

Neighborhood committees offered the urban poor a platform to prioritize their issues and needs. Party politicians do not see garbage collection, electricity, better access to local services, claims-making on the local administration, and catering to immediate supply crises as political fights, but local activists certainly do see them that way. Class relationships within the neighborhood played out as much as class differences between activists from the outside and those within the neighborhoods. The groups were able to successfully implement a host of activities including setting up small buildings and even cafés. But after the bloody confrontations of the summer of 2013 and the authoritarian rollback, many of these initiatives became ineffective due to repression. Mass arrests in one of the districts we surveyed, as well as constant intimidation in the others, created fear and major rifts. At the same time, the authorities tried to co-opt active group members by offering small consultancy contracts or by promising jobs. Thus, groups dissolved and members dropped

out, and arguments arose about how to confront these strategies of the state. Not least, some of the committees' gains were literally destroyed by security forces. For instance, one of the major achievements in one of the districts was setting up a community cultural center, which was subsequently torn down by orders from the local government, after a struggle in which local organizers occupied the building for days to attempt to stop the demolishment.

A New Space for Women?

From the early beginnings of the revolution, women were celebrated for their notable participation and there seemed to be a lot of euphoria about the egalitarian spirit of Tahrir, which at times even allowed women to transgress gender norms.[31] However, after the eighteen revolutionary days had passed, women who wanted to participate in national politics—whether in political parties, civic initiatives, or even in mobilizations and demonstrations—were again excluded. This disempowerment took several forms, ranging from old policies to harassment during protests and other forms of brutal aggression.[32] Male community leaders confronted women with an old discourse, similar to the one that youth faced, claiming that women's supposed lack of real political experience meant that their primary role should be to help mobilization efforts rather than claiming leadership positions.

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The situation in local initiatives wasn't any different. The fact that neighborhood committees were originally formed with a focus on security issues—traditionally a male domain in most societies, and certainly so in Egypt—relegated women to supportive roles right from the beginning. "During the eighteen days, when the committee was mainly responsible for the safety of the neighborhood women would cook for us our meals or stay awake to make us tea," remembered a young male activist in his thirties.[33] This might also have informed the committee's capacity to develop into a political space that could be used by women.

Still, women were active in the groups after the eighteen days. Often, male activists held the women's involvement to be most legitimate when it came to issues linked to traditional gender roles. "When we were protesting the price of gas cylinders, women came out in great numbers, each with their own gas cylinders," recounted a male group leader in his fifties. "We stood in front of the governorate office and chanted while banging on the cylinders."[34] Women were rarely the leaders of the committees, but they often used their networks to mobilize other women.

A female youth activist and NGO community worker recounted women's involvement in a way that illuminated some of the challenges:

> *"In almost all the areas we were working in, there were very active and strong women who knew all of the problems and details of their districts and were involved in all the activities. However, once we have any formal meeting or press conference the women would disappear. Even if we sometimes insist that certain women join in, men would ask: why? Both men and women feel that this isn't a woman's place. It is as if there's a subtle agreement about this arrangement. This is logical; these are gender roles that kick in whenever there are moments of representation. The same level of exclusion was happening in Tahrir within the entities that were supposedly representing the revolution, so I am not surprised that this was happening in local communities within neighborhood committees."*

This sobering assessment is indicative of the fact that the struggle for a different gender order is ongoing and has to confront deeply rooted values and traditions. At the same time, many of our interviewees from both local committees and domestic NGOs are convinced that subtle changes in gender relations have emerged. They say that more women speak out, that their voices are louder and that the January 25 revolution enabled young women to break important taboos, such as those regarding naming sexual harassers and in openly addressing sexual violence.

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Empowerment or Exploitation of Youth in Politics

After the uprising, generational conflicts immediately came to the fore in the formal arena of newly established political parties. The passion and fresh ideas of enthusiastic newcomers met with the resistance of those who were socialized into formal politics under Mubarak, and who considered the young to be naïve. According to our data, in almost every newly founded party and coalition, the old guard perceived the young as power-hungry while lacking experience. In addition, they believed that, before running for office, youth and women should work at the grassroots level and help mobilize voters during elections or demonstrations so that they could first learn "to do politics." Women and youth activists fiercely resisted this line of thinking.

Interestingly, after the eighteen days the neighborhood committees seemed to offer more space for formally marginalized actors, including youth. Their loose structures and their focus on service delivery with empowerment attracted many young people and allowed them to play a more influential role within their local communities. In this sense, the committees were somewhat more inclusive than formal political organizations on the national scale. Our data suggest that many of the leaders and founders of those committees were young people, or considered themselves young. Activists constantly refer to themselves as the shabaab el-mante'ah ("youth of the neighborhood"), with youth often including quite a large age range, from twenty-five to forty-five. Thus, the committees offered spaces for political newcomers to practice grassroots politics while being trained to be leaders. At the same time, the new groups partially sidelined the old vested networks of power and authority, controlled as they were (and continue to be) by members of important families with access to material and symbolical resources.

In 2011 and 2012, the word "shabaab," meaning "youth," had a good sound to it. It seemed to be distant from "siyasah"—"politics"—which was understood to be a dirty game. Politics meant being co-opted and corrupted, and it was an arena for the self-interested. Thus, activists were not surprised to find their power constrained when they interacted with party politicians. Being young and from a marginalized community was a disadvantage in politics. And even the better-off youth within the parties were facing massive generational conflicts. In almost every discussion we had with politically active youth during 2011 and 2012, the general sentiment was that political leaders claimed to guide and empower youth, but in reality they were only exploiting young people to serve their political agendas. Party youth felt that the old guard was only repackaging the Mubarak regime's corrupt and opaque ways of doing politics. These feelings led to deep divisions in many parties, with mass youth resignation and the dissolution of parties' youth wings.

"The state is actually doing a better job in reaching out to youth than the opposition or newly established parties through establishing the presidential program for empowering youth," lamented a young opposition party member in 2016. His disenchantment with his own party was so deep that he welcomed youth-inclusive measures from a government he

otherwise despised. He went on: "Even some of the political parties that are known for their close relations to the state are led by youth. This is something that we [the opposition] didn't do. There isn't one party in Egypt that has special programs for youth. Most of the youth coalitions in their wide range of agendas aren't supported. Most opposition parties are built around the idea of the 'strong man' [the patriarch] who doesn't give any space to youth. . . ."[35]

Class, gender, and age relations were constantly challenged and renegotiated in the political space of the popular committees. These struggles are indeed indicative of how many different people from quite different strands of life have been contesting the authoritarian and informal social contract since 2011, how they have been struggling for new spaces, trying new political languages, and new political practices—while at the same time being confronted with and limited by the powerful old ways.

Between the Formal and the Informal: Committees and Elections

The persistent influence of the old political ways, and their give-and-take with the new practices, became even more complicated during the national elections. At these times, local activists approached political parties for support—and the parties also reached out to local networks, hoping to gain new constituencies. But what could have been a mutually empowering relationship was often fraught with conflicts over priorities, what was properly addressed through politics, and a certain condescending attitude of middle-class and elite actors toward their poorer compatriots.[36]

There existed autonomy at the local level that was deeply interconnected with events on the national level. The 2012 electoral campaigns for both parliament and the presidency are cases in point. Some committee activists revived their old party affiliations, while others searched for new more promising ones in the vibrant and expanding political scene. Others completely rejected closer cooperation with formal actors because they feared co-optation and corruption. Many groups engaged in some type of awareness work, and used the elections and the votes on the constitution in order to again claim public space and discourse, and struggle for more accountability. One seasoned party and community activist recounted how his group organized a series of public meetings with more than one hundred candidates in the neighborhood and how they consulted with them and challenged their programs. As a result, they developed a proposition of whom to vote for. "Our committee was politically diverse, including many different forces, from the Left to the Brotherhood," he said. "After scrutinizing many candidates, we came up with a list of ten good candidates from different political camps in order to help people to make their choices."[37]

Political parties needed neighborhood committees for local access and grassroots mobilization, and neighborhood committees needed political parties to gain access to local and national politics. "The power and strength of local coalitions and neighborhood committees became evident in the various electoral manifestations after the revolution," a

member of a committee in Giza recounted. “For instance, our district voted for Hamdeen Sabahi in the presidential elections in 2012. The only reason for his good results here is the strength of those local coalitions that supported this candidate on the ground. Unfortunately, the political parties weren’t able to fully integrate those local movements and if they had been able to, they would have produced great results.”[38]

Often, the prominent locals did not support the more revolutionary candidates, leaving new political forces in a weak position at the local level. In addition, the political elite and even revolutionaries were often limited by ideas of what was political and what was not. To both groups, the lack of garbage collection was not a political problem, but a constitutional amendment was. Thus, as time progressed, neighborhood committees became more and more frustrated with political parties. Even the ones that carry the banner of social justice seemed to practice exclusionary policies and dismissed the political agendas of the urban poor.

In 2012, members of the old regime’s local elites were already trying to co-opt the new political actors into their networks. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, the elites’ strategy paid off when they won most of the constituencies. Still, even in 2015, neighborhood committees decided to support selected candidates, which were either independent or oppositional and threw their local weight behind them and their campaign. Some of these locally supported candidates were successful: “The victory of the pro-revolution candidates in the last parliamentary elections in our district can be attributed to the work that we have done on the grassroots level in our neighborhood—this is our victory,” claimed a local activist from Cairo, who leads a neighborhood group.[39] In addition, some of the few oppositional members in parliament are accountable to their local community, as this story from the same activist indicates: “We supported two candidates in the parliamentary elections and they made it, also thanks to us. After one year in office, we invited them to come and speak to us. We wanted to take account of their actions in our names in parliament. They actually agreed to do so, paid for the set-up of a decent sitting area, and then we had a long day of discussion and questions. They stayed, and they answered all the questions. We even invited people from the local administration and they came.”

Other committees were less enthusiastic about the performance of “their” man in parliament, as one seasoned local activist recounted: “We supported him under the condition that he also work for our local demands. But it was a compromise from the beginning and we are not satisfied. As leftists and socialists we know that capitalist businessmen will never care about demands—the owners of factories never care about the rights of laborers. Thus, now, we decided to start a local campaign to withdraw confidence from him.”[40]

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Even under the difficult circumstances of 2015 and 2016, with most of the logic of the old authoritarian social contract backs in force, these men, and a few women, claimed their rights as citizens and voters. They insisted on public accountability and on public debate. This is indicative of another shift in the public mood. In 2014 and 2015, the public atmosphere was dominated by discourses of a nation and a state in danger, which needed the unconditional support of all its citizens, including the opposition. A young, well-educated, male candidate of the 2015 election recounted: “It was basically impossible to speak about anything else. You always needed to first say how much danger Egypt is in, how much you care about the state and its security and then, maybe, you could challenge the authorities. There was no politics, really.”[41]

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In addition, several community leaders from neighborhood committees wanted to run for parliamentary elections to be able to represent their districts. They expected both financial and political support from political parties, but more often then not, they received none. Others felt abandoned by the opposition. “I made a mistake in the parliamentary elections of 2015 that I won’t make again,” said an unsuccessful candidate. “In this election I insisted on running with the civil front [opposition] and with the Egyptian Social Democratic Party—even though state-affiliated parties such as ‘Future of the Nation’ were insisting that I run on their name. Once we started the campaign, I found myself alone. Me and my campaign only. I found myself fighting a battle on my own in front of strong coalitions. I felt like I was simply neglected and left to go through the experience on my own.”[42]

Given that competition on the national level is fierce and requires a lot of resources, many local leaders hope that long-awaited local elections might offer a better chance to serve their communities. (Local elections have been postponed over

and over again, since the last elected local councils were dissolved in the summer of 2011.) A few initiatives, such as the Mubadara Mahiliyya (the local initiative), the Mahaliyyat Thawriya (revolutionary localities), and the Mahaliyyat lel-Shabaab (localities for youth) work in order to enhance the legal and political expertise of young men and women in order to enable them to run. Young and old leaders of neighborhood committees consider running for office, because they feel responsible and because they are encouraged by their constituencies: "You do not just decide to run for elections; the people ask you to do so and this is … why I am considering running for local elections," said a man who was a former candidate for the national elections.[43] The work that the neighborhood committees have done in terms of prioritizing local problems, mobilizing the people in their communities and negotiating with local authorities seemed to have given their members the local legitimacy and the self-confidence to consider such an office.

Conclusion and Policy Outlook

Neighborhood committees are new political spaces, which are used in a variety of different ways by different people. In the last six years, they took many shapes; many stopped working altogether after the traumatic summer of 2013 and the ensuing "war on terror." Others continue to claim their space, even in the face of fierce repression. Neighborhood committees can be empowering spaces, especially for young men and some women. This new type of political participation feeds into emerging new political subjectivities, which are more inclusive and less authoritarian. Thus, even as the regime stayed more or less the same by many measures, the people changed. They are transformed by the revolutionary experiences and by the new political practices they have engaged in. This is one of the most important results of the events the Egyptian people lived through since 2011. But the committees are also highly ambiguous, contentious, and power-loaded spaces. Here, actors constantly renegotiate notions of gender, age, class-relations, political orientation, and creed. They also challenge and at times accommodate the logics that stabilize the authoritarian social contract. This social contract sets limits to the contestation of conventional gender, class, or age relations.

The complex experiences of the popular committees have several implications for policy on the local level. First of all, as we showed, the local space is not a void. To the contrary, it is a power-laden, contested sphere, in which formal and informal institutions, state and nonstate actors, and the citizens struggle for access to resources and for control. And even if people are "only" interested in getting better access to services, this necessitates addressing deeply entrenched power relations and vested interests. So, supporting women, youth, or the urban poor is necessarily a political endeavor. In addition, broad labels need to be broken down, based on detailed knowledge of the social structures of a certain place. This knowledge needs to be developed in a bottom-up and participatory manner in order to avoid class, race, or age bias.

The current political situation in Egypt is imposing a heavy toll on any local political and social activism. Change agents on the ground are confronted with ongoing human rights violations, an intimidating political climate, and the soaring economic crisis. International cooperation has become increasingly difficult since 2013. Thus, the challenges to action are enormous. But as many of our interlocutors go on with their work, we offer some policy ideas, against the odds.

Holding competitive, open local elections could empower local constituencies vis-à-vis state authorities. The representation of a wide range of women and youth and their independent movements and coalitions—and not only the regime's women and youth—should be ensured. Changing the law concerning the role, budget, and set-up of local elected councils according to the many available propositions of Egyptian activists and lawyers would be another useful step.

Further, most of the interventions by international organizations thus far have been focused on training and educating grassroots activists on local governance. As useful as this might be, it seems that there has been a saturation and to some extent over-training of local leaders. More emphasis at this point should be put on working with the parliament to ensure that the law on local elections is up to the expectations and needs of grassroots activists. Attempting to apply pressure on the Egyptian government to ensure that transparent and inclusive local elections take place in 2017 is crucial so that local initiatives have a legitimate channel to participate in local and national politics. Another priority should be working with various political parties to integrate diverse local youth in national party's lists. Supporting local activists as candidates for local elections can be done not only through training but also by creating nationwide networks among youth candidates, ensuring that they are aware of the available legal support mechanisms and connecting them to other national NGOs working on local governance.

International and national organizations should ensure that any training opportunities are more inclusive to women and other marginalized communities, rather than over-training the same people. Awareness-raising activities in local spaces should also include gender equality and make sure that existing opportunities do not repeatedly empower certain community leaders, and thus help reproduce unequal power relations.

Finally, several local activists have been detained under the pretense of various charges since 2013. Unlike some national activists who are internationally connected and well-supported, local victims of this repression remain largely unknown. The cases of local activists who have disappeared or been imprisoned should be systematically addressed to ensure that they receive the needed legal and political support.

It goes without saying that the impact of training, empowerment, and awareness work will be limited as long as general political freedoms are heavily curtailed by repression.

About This Project

This policy report is part of "Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism," a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

BANNER IMAGE: MASPERO – PROTESTS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF MASPERO IN CAIRO, WHERE RESIDENTS HAVE LONG CONTESTED THE CONSTANT ATTEMPTS TO EVACUATE THEM AND SELL THEIR HIGHLY ATTRACTIVE PLOTS ON THE BANKS OF THE NILE TO INVESTORS. © FLICKR/GIGI IBRAHIM

Notes

1. This report is based on research funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) in the framework of the project "Political Participation, Emotion, Affect and Transformation," SFB 1171 (collaborative research center "Affective Societies").

2. Labeling the uprisings of 2011 and their aftermath is a contentious issue, both academically and politically. In our understanding, the mass protests led to a revolutionary situation (as McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly coined it), while they did not produce revolutionary outcomes in terms of radical regime change (Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, "To Map Contentious Politics," in Mobilization: An International Journal 1, no. 1 [1996]: 17–34). Throughout the report, we refer to the "January 25 revolution" or a variant, as this is the most commonly used term in Egyptian media and in our conversations alike.

3. For an excellent overview of local activism see Diane Singerman and Ibrahim Kareem,"Urban Egypt—On the Road from Revolution to the State? Governance, the Built Environment, and Social Justice," *Égypte/Monde Arabe 3*, no.11 (2014)

4. As of yet, there are only a few systematic studies of the popular committees on which we can build. Among them are Jennifer A. Bremer, "Leadership and Collective Action in Egypt's Popular Committees: Emergence of Authentic Civic Activism in the Absence of the State," The *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 13, no. 4 (2011); Jennifer Ann Bremer, "Leadership and Collective Action in Egypt's Tahrir Revolution: Emergence of Civic Activism in Response to Repression," paper presented at the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration Annual Conference in Rome, Italy (2011); Asya El-Meehy, "Egypt's Popular Committees: From Moments of Madness to NGO Dilemmas,"*Middle East Report* 42, no. 265 (2012); and Hatem Hassan, "Extraordinary Politics of Ordinary People: Explaining the Microdynamics of Popular Committees in Revolutionary Cairo," *International Sociology* 30, no. 4 (May 8, 2015).

5. The conceptual reflections of this report are built on qualitative research by Harders in the last twenty years in

different popular neighborhoods in Cairo (al-Waili, al-Sayyida Zainab, Bassatin, and Dar al-Salam) since 1994. We conducted interviews in one poor settlement in Bassatin/Cairo and in Dar al-Salam again in September 2011 (Harders) and November 2012 (Harders, Heba Amr). In April 2016 (Wahba) and October 2016 (Harders, Wahba) we conducted more than twenty in-depth semistructured interviews with local activists of neighborhood groups and related initiatives in the Cairo and Giza districts of Boulaq Dakrour, Boulaq Abu Eila, Umraneya, Agouza, and Dokki. In addition, we use field notes from informal visits and walks in the areas. We monitored the online presence of the committees and included photos, videos, and other forms of documentation of their activities. The work is supplemented by the analysis of media reports, reports prepared by NGOs and initiatives, and content of websites, including the official pages of other relevant actors on Facebook.

6. El-Meehy, "Egypt's Popular Committees."

7. See Hania Sholkamy, "Women Are Also Part of This Revolution," in *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, eds. Bahgat Korany and Rabab El-Mahdi (New York, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 153–74; Asef Bayat, "Revolution and Despair," *Mada Masr*, January 25, 2015; Sari Hanafi, "The Arab Revolutions: The Emergence of a New Political Subjectivity," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2012): 198–213; Mohammed A. Bamyeh, "Anarchist Method, Liberal Intention, Authoritarian Lesson: The Arab Spring Between Three Enlightenments," *Constellations* 20, no. 2 (2013): 188–202; Samuli Schielke, *You'll Be Late for the Revolution: An Anthropologist's Diary of the Egyptian Revolution and What Followed*, personal blog.

8. For an excellent account of the daily life and politics of a sha'abi neighborhood of Cairo see Diane Singerman, Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

9. This section is based on earlier work of Harders and collaborative work with Malika Bouziane and Anja Hoffmann in Harders, "'State Analysis from Below' and Political Dynamics in Egypt After 2011," International Journal of Middle East Studies 47, no. 1 (February 2015): 148–51; Anja Hoffmann, Malika Bouziane, and Cilja Harders, "Analyzing Politics beyond the Center in an Age of Transformation," in Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World, ed. Malika Bouziane, Anja Hoffmann, and Cilja Harders (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 3–21.

10. This concept draws on critical, feminist, constructionist, and ethnographic works as sources of inspiration. See for example Salwa Ismail, Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Paul Amar, Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization: Close Encounters of the Deceptive Kind," Current Anthropology 42, no. 1 (2001): 125–38; Akhil Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State," American Ethnologist 22, no. 2 (1995): 375–402; Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Feminist Studies 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

11. Moghadam Valentine, *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

12. Eric Dennis, "The Commodification of the Ashwa′iyyat: Urban Land, Housing Market Unification, and De Soto's

Interventions in Egypt," in *Popular Housing and Urban Land Tenure in the Middle East: Case Studies from Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey*, eds. Myriam Ababsa, Baudouin Dupret, and Eric Denis (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 227–58.

13. Asef Bayat, "Un-Civil Society: The Politics of the 'informal people,'" *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (March 1997): 53–72.

14. Asef Bayat, Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East (United States: Stanford University Press, 2009).

15. Harders, "The Informal Social Pact—The State and the Urban Poor in Cairo," in *Politics from Above, Politics from Below: The Middle East in the Age of Economic Reform*, ed. Eberhard Kienle (London: Saqi Books, 2003), 191–213.

16. Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

17. Amal Hamada, "Understanding the Military Role in the Egyptian Revolution," in Arab Revolutions and Beyond: Change and Persistence, ed. Naoual Belakhdar et al. (Berlin: Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics, 2014), 36–37.

18. See Bremer "Leadership and Collective Action," paper presented at the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration Annual Conference; and Ahmed Saleh, "The Popular Committees: The Local, The Ordinary and the Violent in The Egyptian Revolution," (MA thesis, Central European University, June 2016).

19. Enrique Klaus, "Égypte : 'La Révolution du 25 Janvier' en Contrechamps: Chroniques des 'Comités Populaires' d'Al-Manyal au Caire," Revue Marocaine des Sciences Politiques et Sociales IV (2012): 119–45.

20. Saleh, *The Popular Committees*, 57–63.

21. Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution," Middle East Report 41, no. 258 (2011).

22. Saleh, *The Popular Committees.*

23. Neighborhood committee member, interview with the authors, Cairo, April 4, 2016.

24. Alaa Abd El Fattah, "Jan 25, Five Years On: The Only Words I Can Write Are about Losing My Words," *Mada Masr*, January 2016.

25. Of course, these labels effectively gloss over the differences among the people who they include, but we use them here for the sake of simplicity.

26. Youth activist, interview with the authors.

27. Head of a development NGO, interview with the authors, Downtown Cairo, November 6, 2016.

28. Female community leader of a poor neighbourhood, interview with Harders/Amr, Cairo, November 2012.

29. Youth and party activist from Cairo, interview with the authors, Downtown Cairo, November 3, 2016.

30. Youth activist from Cairo, interview with Harders/Amr, Cairo, November 2012.

31. Hanan Sabea, "A 'Time out of Time': Tahrir, the Political and the Imaginary in the Context of the January 25 Revolution in Egypt," *Cultural Anthropology Hot Spots*, 2012.

32. Nadje Al-Ali, "Gendering the Arab Spring," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5, no. 1 (2012): 26–31.

33. Young activist, interview with the authors, Downtown Cairo, November 3, 2016.

34. Political activist, interview with the authors, Giza, November 8, 2016.

35. Youth activist, interview with the authors, Downtown Cairo, November 3, 2016.

36. Youth activist, interview with the authors, Downtown Cairo, November 3, 2016.

37. Male political activist, interview with the authors, Giza, November 8, 2016.

38. Political activist, interview with the authors, Giza, November 8, 2016.

39. Political activist, interview with the authors, Giza, November 8, 2016.

40. Male neighborhood committee member, interview with the authors, Cairo, April 4, 2016.

41. Young activist, interview with the authors, Downtown Cairo, November 3, 2016.

42. Youth activist, interview with the authors, Downtown Cairo, November 3, 2016.

43. Youth activist, interview with the authors, Downtown, Cairo, June 13, 2016.

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