



Peasants, dispossession and resistance in Egypt: an analysis of protest movements and organisations before and after the 2011 uprising

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ABSTRACT

The livelihoods of Egypt's agrarian working classes have been under attack for at least 30 years by policies dispossessing them of natural and economic resources. This process accelerated in the mid 1990s when a domestic land grab took place, eradicating tenure rights for poor tenants. Rural Egypt was part of the 2011 revolutionary process, although heavily marginalised in narratives about the 'Spring'. Land occupations, farmers' protests and unionisation were part of the revolutionary landscape, in direct continuity with previous struggles, but also showing signs of rupture and innovation. Reactions from below against dispossession have been variegated and developing, but their determinants remain largely unaddressed. The article retraces the trajectories of these struggles, pointing at the crucial role that the peasants' allies (leftist civic activism, NGOs and political parties) have played in enhancing and/or undermining agrarian movements at particular historical conjunctures.

KEYWORDS

Egypt; land; peasants; protest; revolution; Left

MOTS-CLÉS

Égypte; terres; paysans; protestation; révolution; gauche

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RÉSUMÉ

Les moyens de subsistance de la classe ouvrière agraire en Égypte sont menacés depuis au moins 30 ans par des politiques les dépossédant de leurs ressources naturelles et économiques. Ce processus s'est accéléré au milieu des années 1990, lorsqu'un accaparement des terres nationales a eu lieu, supprimant les droits fonciers des métayers les plus pauvres. L'Égypte rurale avait pris part au processus révolutionnaire de 2011, même si elle avait été fortement marginalisée dans les récits sur le « printemps ». Les occupations de la terre, les manifestations d'agriculteurs et la syndicalisation ont tous fait partie du paysage révolutionnaire, en continuité directe avec les luttes précédentes, mais en montrant également des signes de rupture et d'innovation. Les réactions des classes inférieures contre la dépossession ont été diverses et ont évolué, mais leurs déterminants restent largement ignorés. Cet article retrace les trajectoires de ces luttes, en soulignant le rôle crucial joué par les alliés des paysans (activisme civique de gauche, organisations non-gouvernementales et partis politiques) afin de renforcer et /ou saper les mouvements agraires dans certaines conjonctures historiques.

Since the late 1980s, dispossession of natural resources and marginalisation of the poor peasants have been a constant feature of agrarian transformations in North Africa. This has affected the whole landscape of societies, engendering phenomena of migration, urbanisation, environmental degradation, impoverishment and unemployment. Dispossession in Egypt has been gradual and the result of different forms of commoditisation of land and of other crucial agricultural inputs and services.

The process in Egypt suddenly accelerated in the mid 1990s with an unprecedented wave of domestic land grab, ushered in by new legislation that dismantled previous tenure rights. This aroused a variety of reactions from below, primarily from poor peasants and the surrounding rural societies. Understanding these responses, the way in which they were expressed and their outcomes are crucial in order to grasp the developments of social conflict in Egypt's countryside, as well as the dynamics of popular contestation and Egypt's Revolution¹ in light of the Arab revolts of 2010 to 2012 (Zurayk 2016). Yet, few studies have tackled this crucial issue.

Egypt's peasants have been mostly absent from narratives about the 'Spring' of 2011. Rural Egypt has been considered at best passive, or even as a reservoir for counterrevolutionary forces, such as the Islamists or the old regime. In fact, the uprising that brought down the dictator in Egypt was a phenomenon that mainly pertained to large urban centres. This was in contrast to events elsewhere in the region, for example in Tunisia (Ayebe 2011). However, the stories of peasants' political actions from the last 20 years suggest a different narrative about Egypt's revolutionary process, although no easy and straightforward links can be drawn between dispossession and political mobilisation.

When Egypt's government uprooted tenancy rights and cleared the way for expulsions, protest – confronted with heavy state violence – did occur, but it was accompanied and later superseded by quiet demobilisation and a recourse to individual coping strategies. The wave of evictions and the widespread abuses of farmers' rights acted as a rallying point for leftist circles, prompting their mobilisation and the launch of new political initiatives. New advocacy non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that specifically focused their work on land and peasant issues emerged as the main allies in the fight against dispossession, while the role of traditional leftist organisations ultimately receded.

With the eruption of the revolution in January 2011, entire communities mobilised to reclaim lands from which they had previously been evicted, in direct continuity with earlier processes of land-grabbing and defensive counter-enclosure struggles. A strong drive for unionisation of small farmers emerged in the following months, spearheaded by civic activist groups, leading to the unprecedented development of independent peasant organisations.

This article contributes to debates in critical agrarian studies about prevalent models for explaining resistance to land and resource grabs, and its absence, and the forms it takes (Hall et al. 2015). It does so by looking at the role played by 'external allies' (Borras 2016), such as advocacy NGOs, solidarity activists and political organisations, and at the way their intervention has affected the development of mobilisations in the countryside at particular historical conjunctures. It contends that the emergence of resistance, and its forms, should be looked at neither as solely a result of structural factors – dispossession that creates shared grievances that in turn lead to collective action – nor as a simple expression of rational choices – risk aversion. The emergence of resistance instead needs to be viewed in relation to the presence of supportive allies, and to the forms of

their engagement. These allies stand in the middle of a tricky and unresolved contradiction between the autonomy of grassroots mobilisation and the pressing need for the organisation and coordination of largely fragmented struggles in the face of the elites' bloc. While retracing the largely unrecorded history of the last 20 years of peasant mobilisations, the article examines what role non-peasant leaderships have played in facilitating these processes, and to what extent the nature of their 'mobilising projects' has determined their course and outcomes (Chalcraft 2016, 7).

Since the late 1990s in Egypt – in line with a general trend in the global South (Edelman and Borras 2016) – NGOs have emerged as the main actor in defence of peasants' rights and in support of their struggles, entering the vacuum left by traditional party allies. Although this civic activism has refrained from movement-building activities (Bayat 2017), this article shows that it has nonetheless played a significant role in articulating the country's localised protests and claims. Yet, in the post-uprising period prevalent approaches among the peasants' leftist allies mostly focused on channelling movements into institutionalised avenues through unionisation, at a time when little space was available for formal organisations to be sustained. This might have depleted the potential for strengthening local organs of autonomous power and consolidating their gains in the so-called 'transitional' years.

The article is based on six months of fieldwork conducted in Egypt in 2015 that was part of a doctoral research about the role of the Left in the peasant movement in Egypt in a historical perspective. It included about 20 semi-structured interviews with relevant activists and experts, as well as participation at public meetings and press conferences, and review of news reports, NGOs reports and activists' writings. Constraints imposed by the security crackdown prevented access to villages and peasants' activities. The main informants were leftist militants, trade unionists, intellectuals and human rights workers. These activists have worked for and with the *fellahin*, and have often spoken and written on their behalf. They have also been the target of relentless state repression and had to significantly lower the profile of their activities.

This article uses the word *fellah* (plural: *fellahin* – peasant or, more literally, tiller) to refer to the most deprived and marginalised sections of Egypt's farming landholders: the poor peasants and small farmers who farm on plots smaller than five *feddans*² (≤ 2.1 ha), mainly through family labour (Kishk 2015). In the Egyptian context, *fellah* might encompass a broader meaning, being used to refer to villagers and medium or large landowners, or simply to someone with rural origins. The article adopts a narrower definition commonly employed by the research informants to refer to poor peasants, taking into account that as many as 80% of Egypt's smallholders work part- or full-time away from their land (Ayeb 2012, 78).

Pressure on lands is not only driven by agricultural land grabs but also by real estate developments driven by migrants who had enhanced their socio-economic status (Giangrande and De Bonis 2018), in a 'rural world' that is increasingly acquiring urban characteristics (Bayat and Denis 2000).

The article explores the gaps in current debates on dispossession and resistance in rural Egypt, advancing the rationale for centring the focus of investigation on popular agency. Second, it examines the origins of current issues of contention and their main actors in rural Egypt, by retracing the history of the 1997 tenancy crisis and subsequent conflicts in the decade that preceded the uprising. Finally, the article investigates questions about

continuities and ruptures in the post-uprising years, in terms of strategies and repertoires of action. The focus here is on the one hand on the phenomenon of land occupations, and on the other on the development of peasants' trade unions, and their limits and potentiality in attaining gains and in advancing the strength of an incipient *fellahin* movement.

Looking for agency

Most literature on social movements and contentious politics in Egypt and the Middle East (Beinin and Vairel 2013; Gerges Fawaz 2015) has neglected or downplayed the role of peasant and rural protest in Egypt. Questions about who are the peasant and non-peasant subjects of struggles, the dynamics of their inter-relations, the developments of their strategies and organisation, have been under-researched. Rural protests are often characterised by a very fragmented and localistic nature, and by a fluid and intermittent degree of organisation. Both among academic observers and in some sections of activist groups they are considered short-lived explosions lacking a real political value. This has led to a disconnect between civic-democratic and socio-economic protest movements (Abdelrahman 2012; ECESR 2014).

Since the 2011 uprising, a new wave of peasant and rural struggles and organising efforts has revived interest in these initiatives, and the relative softening of state repression has also allowed for opportunities to investigate them. Rami Zurayk and Rachel Gough (2014, 129) contend that the Arab uprisings constituted a space for the articulation of a reaction to this state of affairs by the rural disenfranchised, who 'have little choice but to organize and protest' against market-oriented regimes.

However, with a few exceptions (Ayeb and Bush 2014; El-Nour 2015, Ahmed 2015), most works have failed to emphasise subjective factors to complement other explanations and causal correlations between rural dispossession, agrarian crisis, peasant discontent and popular mobilisation (or the absence thereof). This article responds to the call by Saad (2016) and Bush (2009) for a more comprehensive investigation of the determinants, modes and outcomes of rural and peasant mobilisation.

A focus on macro-transformations and their consequences in terms of inequality and marginalisation can overlook processes of mobilisation, their dynamics, forms and the actors involved. Resistance runs the risk of being taken for granted and read almost as an automatic process, in which the agency of the *fellahin* and other actors is not accounted for. When resistance does not occur, this is often explained (even by local activists) using patronising arguments about passivity on the part of *fellahin*, low levels of political consciousness, preference for Islamists or reliance on conservative patronage networks³ (Interviews with: solidarity group [SG] activist, June 2015; NGO1 activist, December 2015; NGO2 activist November 2015; see Mandour 2016).

While understanding the structural and contextual conditions for the occurrence of popular mobilisation is fundamental, locating the agency of the people is necessary in order to account for their 'creativity' within inherited contexts (Chalcraft 2016). The eruption of the popular uprisings of 2010–2011, along with their dynamics, weaknesses and temporary outcomes and failures, have provided us with yet another motive for investigating popular agency in the Middle East and North Africa. This is also a political imperative for those believing in the potential of the uprisings to deliver justice and emancipation for the subaltern groups.

The 'tenancy crisis': the movement in retreat?

President Gamal Abdel Nasser's agrarian reforms redistributed land to poor landless farmers and war veterans and guaranteed tenancy security to those renting land. A counter-revolution to these reforms has been ongoing in Egypt's countryside since Anwar Sadat's economic opening in the early 1970s. This counter-revolution promoted a neglect of investment in smallholder agriculture, the gradual removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs, a diminished role for cooperatives, the privatisation of irrigation, the liberalisation of previously regulated crop markets and a massive shift of resources towards state-led reclamation efforts aimed at developing large-scale agriculture projects (Bush 2002, 2007). Such processes of dispossession and growing unequal competition over resources have had disastrous effects in terms of food insecurity, social differentiation, economic marginalisation and poverty. More than half of small farmers in Egypt live below the poverty line of US\$2 a day (Ayeb 2012).

Law 96 of 1992, fully implemented in 1997, was a key turning point in agricultural policies. The law liberalised land rents and eradicated the security of landholding that had been established under Nasser's agrarian reforms. The law affected about one million tenants and their families, around six million individuals, raising rents and pushing the tenants off the lands and houses that they had lived in for decades (Saad 2002). The reform politicised land to an unprecedented degree, as it unleashed a wave of ownership claims by 'coalitions for dispossession' including old landed families, state institutions and business people loyal to the regime. These claims – often with the complicity of the administrative, police and judicial bodies of the state – went far beyond the scope of the actual provisions of Law 96 and brought about a full-scale attack on the entitlements of small farmers (Bush 2011). This attack took the form of an actual domestic land grab, stimulating a process of rural land concentration that had been long hindered by Nasserist regulations, accompanied by the parallel fragmentation of land plots (Ayeb 2010). Between 1990 and 2000 the number of farms of less than one feddan increased from 36.7% of the total of land holdings to 43.5%, and by 2010, 68% of farmers had landholdings of one feddan or less (Bush 2016).

The enactment of Law 96 has proved to be a watershed for contemporary peasant struggles in Egypt as it represented a break in the policy direction of the regime and a deep rupture in the farmers' perceptions of the state's position towards them (Saad 1999). The expectations and fears about a general peasant uprising did not materialise. Yet, incidents erupted in more than a hundred villages (LCHR 2002). In response to this large-scale attack, peasants mobilised with demonstrations, road blocks, sending telegrams to government bodies, organising about 200 'peasant conferences' in 1997 and setting up 'peasant committees', terms used in the activists' speeches and writings, to resist the law (LCHR 2001).

Moreover, this moment was central because Law 96 – also known as the Tenancy Law – and the ensuing conflicts acted as a rallying point for leftist activists. Local protests drew them to the countryside, while others moved to remote areas where tenants were still unaware of the consequences of the law. Some leftist parties and the Land Center for Human Rights (LCHR) mobilised in support of the emerging peasant committees. In early 1997, a small group of activists – around a dozen journalists, trade unionists and radical leftists – toured villages in an attempt to meet the farmers and explain the

forthcoming Tenancy Law (personal communications, PSC activist 2015; independent activist 2015).

The National Progressive Unionist Party (NPUP), known as *Tagammu'*, was a catalyst for mobilisation against the Tenancy Law. At the time, it was the only legal leftist party, created under Sadat from an artificial convergence of nationalists, Marxists and liberal Islamists. In 1983, party members had established the only existing Egyptian Peasants' Federation (*Ittihad el-Fellahin el-Masriyn*), but it was never officially recognised by the state. The Federation headquarters were at the *Tagammu'* offices, and its president was a member of the People's Assembly and prominent *Tagammu'* representative. Before the implementation of the reform the party played a central role in mobilising opposition to the law, by collecting hundreds of thousands of farmers' signatures on a petition and holding peasant conferences in the countryside. In April 1997 it called for a mass rally of *fellahin* in Cairo. However, at the same time the party leadership engaged in an accommodating dialogue with the government, as sections of the party were ready to accept only minor cosmetic amendments to the law, basically introducing the possibility for tenants to buy the land from the owners at market price, paying it in instalments. This was seen by other components of the Left movement as a betrayal of the principle that 'the land belongs to those who work it' (Interview with SG activist, November 2015). Ultimately, the most militant faction of the *Tagammu'* seemed to draw back from its commitment to the cause. In October 1997, on the eve of the implementation of Law 96, thousands of farmers marched towards the Federation headquarters in Cairo, but they were literally chased away by leading *Tagammu'* party elements to avoid trouble (Interview with SG activist, November 2015). Indeed, the events of 1997, with the final implementation of the law, resulted in a collapse of the Federation and the decline of the role of the *Tagammu'* in agrarian struggles. The *Tagammu'* leadership eventually opted to safeguard its status of loyal opposition within the regime and shunned the opportunity to support the crystallisation of an incipient movement. No other actor at the time had an outreach and organisational capacities comparable to those of the NPUP.

Over the same period, one of the earliest responses by the activist community – as a reaction both to protests and violations in the countryside and to the withdrawal of the political Left – was the establishment of the LCHR in December 1996, launched with the goals of blocking the final entry into force of the law and of reaching out to peasants to inform them of the impending changes. Later, a number of new organisations and initiatives concerned with peasants' and land rights were launched, some of which emanated from splinter groups that had diverged from LCHR, mostly on account of political differences. These included the Egyptian Organisation for Collective Rights (EOCR), the Rural Studies Center (RSC), the Sons of the Soil Center for Human Rights, and the Peasant Solidarity Committee (PSC). All these organisations shared similar positions on land rights, but differed in organisational matters, both in terms of their own internal organisation and in relation to their *fellahin* base. The PSC has since continued to work as an informal network of peasant and non-peasant activists, relying on a small nucleus keeping contact with a limited number of peasant communities affected by dispossession and supporting them with legal advice and publicity through press releases and a blog. All the other organisations were established instead as registered NGOs and since the very beginning relied on professional staff engaging more systematically in research, advocacy, legal assistance and training. Peasants apparently did not figure among the membership of

these organisations (Interview with SG activist, June 2015). Specialisation also ensued, as some NGOs expanded the scope of their activity to include labour, gender and environmental issues.

With the Tenancy Law, ‘networks of resistance’ began to be formed between peasant communities, political organisations and solidarity activists (Bush 2011). According to one LCHR report assessing that period four years later, ‘although the peasant movement did not succeed in its main goal, it was nonetheless a major factor in putting the *fellahin* and their problems on the agenda of civic work in Egypt’ (LCHR 2001).

In retrospect, there is a widespread self-critique among leftist circles pointing at the fact that efforts made to support peasant mobilisation and to stop the law were too little and too late (personal communication, independent activist 2015). According to the LCHR (2001, 3),

as for the role played by political forces and non-governmental organisations ... they lost a historical and unique opportunity by not upholding the demands of the peasant movement, not developing them, and not linking them to the causes of the whole society.

In the end, the harsh repression encountered by every initiative in the villages made it impossible for both activists and farmers to build more organised forms of mobilisation. Against leftists working in the countryside the authorities invoked emergency laws used against Islamist militants (Kienle 2001). With the loss of land, tenants lost their main source of livelihood. Protest receded, and while some resorted to judicial struggles for compensation with support from sympathetic lawyers and NGOs, most responded with individual coping mechanisms in order to face the new harsher living conditions (Saad 2016).

The emergence of human rights civic activism marked a qualitative shift from the Egyptian Left’s traditional engagement with the peasantry. After its launch, the LCHR shifted from community organising and movement-building towards judicial assistance, legal training and research activities. Although limited in their reach and mired in internal conflicts, NGOs had the merit of drawing the public’s attention to rural Egypt. Their work also created fluid linkages with communities and local leaders that became vital in the post-uprising stage, as they represented a basis upon which they could build more solid networks.

The most durable and important legacy of human rights civic activism is twofold. First, through their advocacy and assistance work, NGOs activists were able to witness first-hand the social realities of the countryside and deepen their knowledge of rural Egypt. In addition, this engagement resulted in an unprecedented outreach of politicised activists across marginal peasant communities. These activists mostly remained urban professionals responding to calls for help, travelling to the villages from their Cairo offices, providing free services and information and instructing local lawyers, yet this constant work built bonds of trust and networks of relations that proved crucial in initiating new forms of struggle in the post-uprising period.

The *fellahin* and the Revolution: between direct action and institutionalisation

The 2011 uprising in Egypt came after at least a decade of widespread protests at all societal levels. While unconnected and dispersed, the protests ‘were paramount to the

process of mobilisation of previously non-politicised citizens and for emboldening more groups and individuals to confront the state in new spaces' (Abdelrahman 2015, 66). Farmers and rural Egyptians were not alien to this new culture of protest sweeping the country. Indeed, the decade that preceded the uprising witnessed a new wave of rural contention, which signalled a qualitative shift in terms of effectiveness but also in terms of issues and constituencies (Saad 2016). An increasingly urbanised rural Egypt started to reclaim a whole range of citizenship entitlements that went far beyond strictly agrarian concerns. Also, social and geographical proximity to large-scale industrial agitation (such as that in the Delta areas of Mahalla, Kafr el-Dawwar) since 2008 undoubtedly played a role that still needs to be thoroughly investigated.

Although the extent of the 'rural' participation in the legendary 'Eighteen Days' of Tahrir was limited, a lot occurred in Egypt's countryside beyond the range of media and often also activists' radar (Abu Lughod 2012). A new wave of contention shook the countryside, sparked by the revolutionary uprising of Cairo and the other major cities, but originating from conflicts that had been long simmering.

Peasants grab back the land

The virtual disappearance of security forces all over the country in the early stages of the uprising gave way to a limited but promising wave of land occupations unseen for decades. These were especially evident in villages where entire communities had been violently dispossessed in the 1990s and 2000s. The occurrence and the militancy of farmers' street protests intensified in the years 2011 and 2012, both at the local level and in the capital. Several mass protests took place between February and March 2011, including a demonstration of *fellahin* from Daqahliya, Gharbeya and Alexandria governorates staged on 13 March in Cairo in front of the Ministry Council, a scene unseen in the capital at least since 1997 (Saqr 2011b).

The episodes of land occupation have been mostly documented by blog pieces on the PSC website authored by Bashir Saqr, founder and leading activist of the Committee, who had militated for redistributive land reform in Nasserist Egypt. Very early on, in March 2011, he observed: 'The Egyptian farmers [are starting] the second phase of the Egyptian Revolution' (Saqr 2011a). Indeed, Saqr was keen to highlight that 'only a few tens of villages erupted in protest actions. Most of these villages were already centres of peasant activism before the revolution' (Saqr 2011b). Yet, these early episodes are very significant, both for the radical forms they took, and also for potential for further expansion had they not encountered the heavy hand of hired thugs, army, police and local authorities in the first weeks after Hosni Mubarak's overthrow.

One of the earliest episodes featured people mobilising in the village of Tusun, east of Alexandria. On 28 January 2011 a group of local inhabitants reclaimed 160,000 square metres of land from which they had been evicted in 2008 and started to rebuild their houses. The villagers had staged 53 protests in the preceding years to demand that the court ruling establishing their right to the land be applied and the land returned (Saqr 2011c). On that day, upon ordering the private guards to leave the place, they reportedly told them 'Now, we will execute the final court decision' (Saqr 2011a).

A similar episode occurred in the village of 'Amereiya, in the Delta governorate of Beheira, where the villagers occupied lands that had been expropriated by a general

from the state security service. On 14 February, a group of farmers, helped by thousands of *fellahin* from the neighbouring villages, repelled an attack by armed men following the general's orders. The general's villa, which had been built on the expropriated land, was burnt to the ground (Saqr 2011c).

In the following days, in the two neighbouring villages of Barnougy and Ezbet 'Akef, farmers reclaimed the possession of 100 feddans lost in the 1980s at the hands of the local 'feudal' family. Saqr recounted that 'in those days these villages looked like the days of the old wedding parties, unseen in the countryside for a long time. You could meet *fellahin* smiling in the streets, with joy on their faces' (Saqr 2011c). In Ma'moura, east of Alexandria, farmers retook 37 feddans that the Religious Endowment Ministry had sold in 2009 to real estate companies linked to police officers' and judges' circles. The clashes that year had resulted in the death of one farmer who refused to give up his land. In the village of Baqliya in Daqahliya, farmers occupied 40 feddans expropriated in the 1980s and started to farm it again.

In the same governorate, between three and nine thousand farmers from seven villages gathered twice in one week in the provincial capital Mansoura to protest against the Endowment Authority for raising land rents. After besieging the governorate premises, the protesters were approached by the army and dispersed. A further four similar protests were recorded in the governorates of Sharqiya and Daqahleya, numbering over three thousand participants each (Saqr 2011c).

In the village of Qutat Qarun in Fayyum the protagonists were 60 former tenant families that had been evicted from 150 feddans in 1997. At that time, the lands were returned to the Wali family, one of whose heirs was the longest-running minister of agriculture, former prime minister and secretary general of the ruling National Democratic Party, Youssef Wali. After the fall of Mubarak, the *fellahin* took back the land and started to cultivate it, experimenting with forms of cooperative organisation for the purchase of fertilisers and the sale of products (Yehia 2014, 2015).

The events that occurred in the village of Sersou, in Daqahliya, hold symbolic relevance because they concerned veterans of the 1962 Yemen war who had been rewarded by Nasser with small plots of land. On 25 January 1996 they had been evicted by an armed gang hired by the al-Masry family, expropriated in 1961 under the Agrarian Reform law. In the following years, the farmers repeatedly won court cases restoring their right to the land, yet none of these decisions was implemented. In February 2011 the farmers retook the 44 feddans. With their action, they were directly obstructing the projects of the landowner, businessman and NDP politician Farid al-Masry, who was planning to expand his Gravena ceramics factory plants onto the Sersou land plots. 'This wasn't simply a matter of opportunistic timing', commented an elder woman of the village to journalist Isabel Esterman (2015): 'For the farmers, it was their way of participating in the revolution happening in the cities.'

During the revolutionary frenzy, many other land occupations have probably occurred in other localities and gone undocumented. Being beyond the reach of activists and journalists, these land occupations represent a particular instance of the 'people's enclosure campaigns' envisaged by Borras and Franco (2012), yet one in which poor agrarian communities occupy not state lands or latifundia, but relatively small plots of lands that they were evicted from at least a decade earlier, and they do it collectively, as a community. Further research into this brief but intense period of farmers' direct activism could disclose new perspectives on revolutionary Egypt.

Yet, just a few months after the end of Mubarak's reign, both local elites and security forces were able once more to use the powers that had been temporarily suspended with the uprising. The changed political conditions put them once again in a position to reclaim the land. Some occupations, such as that in 'Amereiya, encountered evictions and repression as early as March 2011. Less than 48 hours after being arrested, five farmers were convicted by a military prosecutor and given jail sentences of up to five years. A similar fate was meted out to the farmers of Ezbet Houd 13 in Alexandria governorate: believing in the revolutionary sincerity of the army, the farmers informed the military authorities of their action whereby they had reclaimed around 40 feddans from a local landowner and former MP. Clashes ensued on 21 March, with the military police conducting a violent campaign and referring four arrested farmers to a military prosecutor. This pattern recurred in almost all the villages involved in land occupations (Saqr 2011d). The timing of these repressive operations is important, in that violent crackdowns, random arrests, the violation of basic legal rights and the exemplary punishments demonstrated the intention of the transitional military rule to deter any further expansion of the occupations and of peasant militancy in general. While the focus of most activists was still on Tahrir Square, little political work was done to create solidarity and support networks in the countryside. The crackdown only worsened after the military overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013. One of the responses of most peasant and non-peasant activists was to work hard toward the establishment of new farmers' trade unions that could provide institutional avenues to represent their constituencies and influence the post-uprising policies.

What is to be done: movement or unionisation?

Before 2011, unlike other categories of workers, peasant trade unions – even state-controlled ones – were forbidden. Since 2011 the status of independent trade unions has not been legalised, leaving them in a state of uncertainty, with no possibility of registering officially (Abdalla 2017, 15). Nonetheless, the political opening encouraged many to establish peasants' organisations. By 2012 around 200 independent farmers' trade unions had been established, organised into national and local federations (personal communication, NGO3 activist, June 2015; El-Nour and Abdel Ghaffar 2017). One human rights activist was keen to distinguish these 'truly independent' unions ('close to the Left') from those linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Ministry of Agriculture. According to him, at the peak of their activity independent peasant trade unions had a constituency of about 150,000 members (personal communication, NGO3 activist, June 2015).

Political groups, parties and human rights centres working on rural issues pursued different paths of engagement. A wide and diverse spectrum of organisational approaches emerged, ranging from those who privileged top-down establishment of a centralised and formally structured nation-level trade union to those who supported ongoing struggle without pushing on to unionisation, passing through the option for fostering the creation of local-level unions later to be federated at a higher level. Of course, these groups and bodies differed to greater or lesser degrees in the constituencies that they addressed, as well as in organisational matters.⁴

The more centralist approach was represented by the General Federation of Egyptian Peasants, a new formation in 2011 of the earlier Federation linked to the *Tagammu'* party. Among the leading figures of the Federation was the late Shahenda Maqlad, one

of the most prominent activists in support of peasant struggles, who had been a member of the *Tagammu'* and among the founders of the earlier Federation (Ahmed and Saad 2011). Her close engagement with peasants dated from the earliest struggles for land reform in the 1950s and 1960s, to the extent that she had become an iconic personality known as 'leader of the *fellahin*'. By 2015 the Federation had its headquarters in downtown Cairo, claiming to have a presence in all of the 27 governorates and a membership of about 70,000 peasants (personal communication, S. Maqlad, 13 December 2015, General Federation of Egyptian Peasants headquarters, Cairo). The Federation's constituency is more representative of mid-level peasants rather than poor ones, as it has a much higher threshold with regard to the maximum area of land holding (up to 12.5 feddans) compared to the other independent trade unions (where the cap was set at 5 feddans) (personal communication, S. Maqlad, 13 December 2015). In my conversation with the Federation's General Secretary in December 2015, she only mentioned internal organisation and dialogue with the government as the current activities of the Federation, which claimed to be the only legitimate and representative organisation of Egypt's peasants. Its demands generally focus on the establishment of a new corporatist bargain with the state, by creating an entity for cooperation between the state decision-making bodies and the 'legitimate' farmers' representatives (personal communication, S. Maqlad, 13 December 2015). Since mid 2013 the Federation has fully supported the military coup and the presidency of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the same regime that was curtailing the peasants' right to protest and organise all over the country.

Another path of engagement was followed by various human rights advocacy NGOs. Many of these favoured the building of dozens of local trade unions, sometimes federated at a regional and national level. In quantitative and qualitative terms this represented the most significant and solid – however fragmented – organising attempt. Local unions were formed by poor peasants, tenants – including those evicted and reoccupying lands – and fishers. In 2011 a national federation of the unions linked to the LCHR was established: it was originally based in a village in Beheira governorate, but subsequently moved its headquarters to the LCHR offices in Cairo. By 2015 many of these unions had stopped their activities mainly because of repression, and the federation's offices were closed, as the LCHR headquarters had been repeatedly raided by the security forces (Interview with NGO3 activist, June 2015; field visit to the LCHR office building). However, other NGOs were also involved in supporting the establishment of unions and by the end of 2015 one regional federation was active and another one was being set up in Upper Egypt. On a lower profile, some of them were still working to build larger organisations and networks (Interview with NGO1 activist.).

Since March 2011, human rights centres have focused their greatest efforts on training activities. Between 2011 and 2012 activists held dozens of meetings in the Delta and Upper Egypt villages to set up unions. Meetings with farmers in this phase consisted in a training programme on how to establish and run a trade union, and advocacy training (Interview with NGO3 activist, June 2015). The LCHR published educational materials setting out the content of the training programmes: these mostly focused on giving an overview of the legal provisions granting the right to organisation under the national and international law, and explanations of the traditional role of trade unions. Affiliation to the federations seemed to be largely formal and organisational links were thin. Moreover, several trade unionists have suffered from the heavy crackdown, especially after the military coup

and the criminalisation of protest. As happened in 1997, repression was systematically aimed at severing links between peasant activists and their allies.

In the period 2011–2012 the federations and their NGO partners generally focused their efforts on the collection of membership subscriptions, the building of a bureaucratic structure and the training of cadres. For their part, local trade unions were mostly concerned with specific issues, largely regarding claims to the land, access to subsidised inputs and more favourable prices for their products, in some cases taking on a role similar to the inefficient agricultural cooperatives. Also, they advanced demands regarding broader rural concerns, such as in the case of a successful fight for access to subsidised cooking gas in 2012 in Minya governorate (personal communication, scholar activist, December 2015).

Local unions were stronger where there had been previous conflicts and activism around a common cause. While these unions were usually effective in performing this role, their NGOs allies have sometimes criticised this approach as too narrow and lacking a more comprehensive view of political issues and of trade union organising (LCHR 2014; personal communication, NGO1 activist, December 2015).

Before 2011 legal-institutional channels were not much of a choice for human rights activists, as harsh repression had closed spaces for virtually any other political initiative. After the uprising, advocacy NGOs continued to follow this path, in the conviction that the new political conditions would have allowed for formal organisations to be set up and consolidated. Yet, the rapid reversal of the gains of the Revolution has crushed the fledgling trade unions.

Sociologist Asef Bayat (2017) put forward a critique of the civil society activism that emerged in the 1990s as having given up revolutionary goals in favour of a reformist agenda with a neoliberal bias. Bayat (*Ibid.*, 25) observed that this form of activism ‘proved very different from forging social movements for change’, thus impairing the potential emergence of a popular counter-power after the uprisings of 2011. Even in the case of NGOs working on peasant rights, it is true that their work to some extent constituted ‘elite advocacy’ (Bayat 2017, 174), as peasants were not active subjects, but mostly defendants or claimants to be assisted in court and with paperwork, while activists behaved as service providers. In fact, a division of labour persisted between NGOs professionals with political and technical expertise and their peasant counterparts. This division was in part overcome after 2011, when, with trade unions and grassroots mobilisations, peasants more actively took strategical and organisational matters into their own hands.

Yet, although NGO activists had mostly refrained from a more explicitly political work, in their activism the focus on human rights and the rule of law was never disconnected from the harsh realities of the poor farmers and their socio-economic concerns. Their vision of democratisation and legal reform was – and still is – rooted in calls for social justice that require the systems of power oppressing the agrarian working classes to be overturned. The unionisation of peasants also helped to forge embryonic links between them and the broader independent trade union and labour movements, as well as with the human rights and civic democratic circles in the cities.

Following the first trend (represented by the centralist, state-centered and pro-coup General Federation) and the second trend (represented by the various advocacy NGOs that engaged in the establishment of trade unions starting from the local level and building on previous links and struggles), a third trend of activism followed a different approach, avoiding

pushing in the direction of unionisation but still supporting struggles and claims, whatever form they took. The Peasant Solidarity Committee, with its network of about 40 peasant communities spread especially over the Delta and the Fayoum regions, continued to offer to these communities publicity through its media and legal support. The Committee (including only a few stable members) mostly worked with groups of tenants or former tenants, evicted or under threat of eviction. Without in principle opposing the idea of trade unions, one of the Committee's leaders expressed concerns over the hasty launch of organisations at a moment when struggles were still emerging (Saqr 2011e). As local movements were still facing the dangers of confrontation with the authorities, collecting subscriptions, electing internal bodies and drafting bylaws were seen as less of a priority for militant work in the countryside: 'You are in front of peasants who are being evicted from their lands – can you talk about unions at such a moment?' (personal communication SG activist, June 2015).

After January 2011, a new leftist organisation – the Socialist Popular Alliance Party (SPAP) – emerged after a group from *Tagammu'* left and joined hands with other groups. Its Workers' Committee has been working on peasant issues, trying to build fronts by connecting different communities that share similar problems, especially in relation to land issues and evictions. The party favoured cooperation between local youth and activists, trade unions, human rights centres and the peasants involved and established a network of solidarity focused on workers' and peasants' struggles (Field notes, May 2015; interview with SPAP member, December 2015). The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR) also engaged with rural communities over a variety of issues – including legal support to emerging trade unions. Its work in the village of el-Kola highlights the struggle of peasants who reclaimed land from the desert and now faced attack from state bodies planning the development of a new urban community on their fields. Besides legal defence, ECESR's ethnographic work also had a political value, in that it gave the community a sense of dignity to the point that neighbouring villages also asked them to undertake similar fieldwork (ECESR 2016; interview with ECESR researcher, 2015). Between 2011 and 2012, the ECESR, in cooperation with other organisations, conducted a campaign called 'Workers and farmers write the constitution' to voice peasants' demands and concerns in the debate over the drafting of the new constitution, through workshops and field meetings with groups of peasants and the trade union federations (ECESR 2011).

As shown in the examples of growing movements and activism recorded above, a vibrant dialectic about how to best support, organise and lead poor peoples' and subaltern movements has emerged in Egypt's activist circles since the Revolution. Such debates are vital to processes of emancipation. They are not new, nor are they confined to rural/peasant politics. Indeed, they are still ongoing, as are the grassroots struggles, waiting for the moment and opportunity when they can grow and influence each other.

Conclusions

Land remains a defining issue in rural Egypt's social and political life. Even if today the livelihoods of peasant communities no longer depend exclusively on land, struggles in the revolutionary period have shown that land access is still at the centre of the claims of rural subaltern groups, as national elites and state authorities have never ceased to challenge their land rights.

This article has shown the diversity of political reactions from below against land grabbing in Egypt. These reactions range from coping and judicialisation to unionisation, protest and land occupations. Reactions have not always entailed resistance, corroborating recent critical agrarian scholarship on this matter (Borras and Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015): the tenancy crisis of 1997 showed that, even when the livelihoods of poor and small peasants are directly threatened as a result of expulsion, the initially fierce peasant resistance may be defused and can rapidly fade away without taking a more organised form. While in other cases (Mamonova 2015) the absence of resistance is explained by the peasants opting for favourable inclusion in new land deals, in the tenancy crisis there was little room for inclusive deals. At that juncture, a major explanation for the absence of resistance could be the ambiguous positioning and then abrupt withdrawal of one key political ally (the *Tagammu*), which pushed back the embryonic peasant movement.

Peasant movements repeatedly stimulated the engagement of external allies – mainly leftist organisations and NGOs – while in turn the latter were crucial in sustaining piecemeal resistance also during periods of low mobilisation, as was the case after the defeat of 1997. As for the role of external allies, NGOs in post-2011 Egypt were key to the unionisation process and aggregation of localised movements, as in other cases in the global South (Bachriadi 2010), but the terms of the alliance between peasants and NGOs changed significantly after the break-up of the authoritarian order, as peasants took a more active part in negotiating these terms. Indeed, while peasant communities have enthusiastically adopted the trade union form on a large scale, they have mostly deployed it in the service of their own local struggles and to obtain immediate gains in the face of elites and state authorities. This has not advanced the institutionalisation and broader organisation-building at the national level upheld by their NGO partners. The most significant experiences occurred where trade unions had built strong constituencies at the local level not as a consequence of a successful formalisation of their membership and structure, but as a result of long, sustained conflicts or victorious struggles. This article suggests that the terms of the peasant-NGO alliances, their evolution and the negotiations and contestations that occurred around them, are an important area for future engagement.

The article has shown that with the changing of the wider political conditions and the opening of new opportunities in 2011 – even if only for a short period – peasant struggles for land moved from quiet retreat and mostly reactive initiatives to direct action and self-organising. However, peasant resistance on land issues did not take place only when the political context was favourable: in 1997 the *fellahin* rose up almost alone against a wide dispossession process, aware that they would meet a strong backlash from the security state. Yet, in the end resistance could be sustained and gain organisational strength only when the three conditions concurred: wide and intense struggles from below, favourable openings in the authoritarian political context, and the presence of organic links with supportive allies.

Notes

1. 'Revolution' (*thawra*) is the term used by activists to refer to the 2011–2013 wave of popular mobilisation in Egypt. Here, it is understood as an ongoing long-term process that started at least a decade before January 2011 but the article employs the word alongside others like 'uprising' and 'revolt', which refer more specifically to the events of 2011 and their aftermath.

2. An Egyptian *feddan* equals 4200 square metres = 0.42 hectares.
3. For safety reasons, when interviews are quoted I have anonymised the names of the people interviewed and the organisations to which they belong, and I omit the exact details of our meetings.
4. For an overview of the debates on the unionisation of peasants see also De Lellis 2018.

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