

Children on the edge of the City of the Dead in Cairo.

John Tordai

## Cairo's Poor Dilemmas of Survival and Solidarity

Asef Bayat

The dearth of cooperative and contentious collective action on the part of the Egyptian urban poor by no means implies a lack of grassroots activism. Conditioned by political and cultural constraints, the poor instead resort to an alternative strategy—that of quiet encroachment. Qualitatively different from defensive measures or coping mechanisms, this strategy represents a silent, protracted, pervasive advancement of ordinary people—through open-ended and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization—on the propertied and powerful in order to survive.

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The proliferation of more than 100 squatter communities with some six million inhabitants signifies only one, but perhaps the starkest, component of the growing socioeconomic disparity<sup>1</sup> in Cairo since Sadat's *infitah* ("opening up" or economic liberalization) in 1974 and the more recent implementation of the IMF's structural adjustment program. Between 1981 and 1991, rural poverty doubled and urban poverty increased more than 1.5 times.<sup>2</sup> By the early 1990s, more than half of Cairo and adjacent Giza were classified either as "poor" or "ultra-poor."<sup>3</sup> Millions of Cairenes are consumed by their constant search for adequate food, shelter, jobs and the maintenance of individual and familial dignity; most are involved in the informal economy and live in informal communities.<sup>4</sup>

For some time, state safety nets, in particular populist measures of protection, served to sustain low-income groups. With the dawn of neo-liberalism in Egypt in the 1980s, as in many other countries, the populist state has gradually withdrawn its protection from the popular sectors—peasants, workers and the urban poor. Although it is acknowledged that the poor will suffer in the short-term, the trickle-down of national economic growth is expected in the long run to benefit the poor as well. Thus far, however, there is no evidence to suggest that this is actually the case. If anything, every sign indicates increasing social inequality and impoverishment.

The Social Fund for Development (SFD)—a "safety net" program capitalized by the World Bank and other bilateral and multilateral donors at over \$1 billion dollars and designed to offset the negative impact of structural adjustment programs on the "losers" in the Egyptian economy—has encountered innumerable problems in addressing its mandate of reaching the poor through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>5</sup> The SFD and its backers nonetheless remain optimistic about the ability of NGOs to enhance structural adjustment without exacerbating poverty. Many Egyptian NGOs—spread throughout many of Cairo's poorer neighborhoods—specialize in relief work or in community development activities, including poverty alleviation, income generation and child protection. More than 100 NGOs are active in the Sayyida Zeinab neighborhood in Cairo alone. The extent of their effectiveness, however, remains unclear due largely to the fact that an in-depth and comprehensive evaluation of the NGOs' impact in Egypt has yet to be done. The few available studies do not offer a bright picture.<sup>6</sup> Although these NGOs provide some services, credit and financial assistance to the needy, their ability to sustain and empower the lower class remains limited. Even the more efficient Christian and Islamic NGOs limit themselves largely to the ad hoc provision of emergency services. While the activities of NGOs in Egyptian society are surely a welcome development, one should acknowledge that their meager resources cannot match the magnitude of the needs of the urban poor in Cairo.

Poor Cairenes cope with these economic realities either by stretching their resources to meet their needs or by cutting down on their consumption. Thus, breadwinners are forced to work longer hours, while other family members—primarily women and children—must also work. Some resort to

selling their personal belongings for cash, begging and even prostitution. They further decrease their expenditures by sharing living spaces with relatives, purchasing low-quality food and secondhand clothes which they may share with others within the household, limiting health and education expenses, and reducing daily meals to two or one.<sup>7</sup> These practices are as common now in Cairo as in New Delhi, Manila or Rio de Janeiro.

## Community Activism

Beneath these coping mechanisms, there is also a strong, if quiet, tide of resentment, resistance and reclamation. When opportunities arise, the poor do get involved in visible collective struggle. When opportunities to engage in suitable types of social activism are unavailable, they may create them. Inaz Tewfiq's account (in this issue) of the prolonged struggles of the residents of Ezbat Mekawy is one example. In this low-income neighborhood in Cairo, residents managed, through several years of collective campaigning, to close down local smelter plants which had caused major health and environmental problems. They used traditional strategies of communication within the community, as well as modern tactics, such as engaging the media, lobbying politicians and accessing the court system as a means of registering opposition.

Compared to the poor in Latin American and South Asian cities, however, such overt and organized social activism is quite rare among Cairo's poor.<sup>8</sup> While the lower classes in Cairo are aware of environmental problems, they do little to address them through collective action, either through cooperative communal engagement to upgrade the community itself, or through contentious protest actions. Social networks, which extend beyond kinship and ethnicity, remain overwhelmingly casual, unstructured and nonpolitical. (The *gamaiyyat*, the informal credit system, is perhaps the most important form of neighborhood networking in Cairo.) The weakness of civic or non-kinship cooperation at the community level only reinforces traditional hierarchical, paternalistic relations with people depending more on local elders and problem solvers than on broad-based social activism.

Why are the poor of Cairo not as mobilized as their counterparts, for example, in Mexico City or Tehran? In Monterey, Mexico, shantytown dwellers were able to stop a freight train full of corn as families rushed out "to fill pots and sacks full of grain."<sup>9</sup> In Iran, the protests of the urban poor in the early 1990s,<sup>10</sup> notably the three-day riots in the neighborhood of Islamshahr in Tehran, constituted one of the most significant internal political challenges to the Islamic Republic.<sup>11</sup>

One major reason for the lack of mass protest in Cairo is the absence of structures that permit collective action in Egypt. Sadat's "Emergency Law" restricts contentious collective activities. Likewise, the present electoral structure in Egypt is not as conducive to group mobilization as it is, for example, in India or Turkey. In a truly competitive political system, political forces are compelled to bargain with, and thus mobilize, the poor to win their electoral support. In Egypt, this hap-

## Facts and Figures on Cairo

Despite the attention focused on the problems of cities around the world—most recently at the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul—surprisingly little comparable data on urban centers are available, as was found by the World Resources Institute in preparing their 1996-97 World Resources report. Population figures, for example, often vary depending on the definition of the urban center concerned. In the case of Cairo, estimates of its population range from a low of 9.7 million to a high of 12 million. This variation is due, in part, to the fact that Cairo can be defined at least three ways: Cairo City, metropolitan Cairo, and the Greater Cairo Region; Greater Cairo falls under at least three separate jurisdictions—Cairo, Giza, and Qalyubia—which further complicates the collection of data.

**Population Density** Greater Cairo: 40,000 persons per square kilometer; up to 100,000/km<sup>2</sup> in older districts.

**Rate of Growth** While Cairo City is now growing at a rate of less than two percent per year, other parts of Greater Cairo are growing at a rate of more than three percent. If growth were to continue at just the two percent rate, however, Cairo's population would double in 35 years.

**Life Expectancy** 65 years

**Infant Mortality** 35.1 per 1,000 live births (1991), Cairo City only. As in many developing countries, infant mortality rates are lower in urban than in rural areas. A comparison of data from the mid-1980s with that of other major cities placed Cairo on a par with Bombay and Istanbul.

**Maternal Mortality** 200 women die for every 100,000 live births (1992), Cairo City only. Egypt's overall maternal mortality rate of about 250 per 100,000 live births is in the range of such countries as Guatemala and Mexico, but roughly twice as high as the rate in such ME/NA countries as Tunisia, Iran and Syria.

**Adult Literacy** 69.3 percent total; 59.2 percent female (1992) Cairo City only.

**Unemployment Rate** 10 percent (1993), Cairo City only. Unemployment among women is estimated at 20.7 percent. Beyond the official unemployment rate, however, disguised unemployment or underemployment, is a severe problem in both the central and local government bureaucracy where the rate of disguised unemployment may exceed 30 percent.

**Income** LE 2782 per capita (1992), Cairo City only. Real GDP per capita, which is based upon purchasing power, was estimated at \$2,570 for 1992/93 or about half of what the UNDP considers sufficient.

**Water** About 20 percent of Cairo's population, mostly in Giza and other peripheral areas, have no access to piped water and use canals, wells and public water fountains. As much as half the water available is lost due to leaks and breaks in water pipes.

**Electricity** More than 95 percent of households throughout Greater Cairo have electricity.

**Sewerage** Some three million people lack adequate sewerage. In the 1970s, prior to an internationally financed upgrading of some of the sewerage system, over 100 incidents of sewerage flooding occurred daily.

**Telephones** 510 per 1000 households (Cairo City only, 1992).

**Public Safety** In a 1990 study, the murder rate in Cairo was cited as less than five per 100,000 population per year. This was on a par with most Asian cities and similar to murder rates in cities in Britain/the United Kingdom. Murder rates in such US cities as New York; Washington, DC; and Miami were between 10 and 20 per 100,000.

—Compiled by Sally Ethelston

**Sources** *Egypt Human Development Report 1995*, (Cairo, Egypt: Institute of National Planning, 1995); *Cities: Life in the World's 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas*, (Washington, DC: Population Action International, 1990); United Nations Population Division, *Population Growth and Policies in Mega-Cities: Cairo*, (New York: United Nations, 1990); World Resources Institute, et. al., *World Resources 1996-97*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

pens only in rare cases where opposition parties are involved in local disputes.<sup>12</sup> Although many Islamic associations are indeed involved in welfare activities, they rarely result in social mobilization and group activity. The impetus behind such institutions as Islamic clinics or associations ("social Islam"), like their Christian counterparts, is largely a combination of religious/moral, social and economic concerns. Few expound an explicit political agenda with the aim of collective mobilization.<sup>13</sup>

Political patronage in other impoverished countries sometimes leads inadvertently to social and political mobilization when patrons bargain with their poor clients in their pursuit of political power. The mobilization of street vendors in Mexico City is partially the result of this type of political patronage.<sup>14</sup> In Cairo, however, patronage appears to work more through individual channels, which rarely leads to the organization of group activities.

Today, the legacy of Nasserite populism continues to influence the political behavior of ordinary people. Nasserism established a social contract between the popular classes and the state, whereby the state agreed to provide the basic necessities in exchange for popular support, social peace and, consequently, demobilization. This was an agreement between the state and a shapeless mass, an aggregate of individuals and corporate institutions, in which the idea of a plural, independent and critical collectivity was seriously undermined. While the social contract is waning and market forces are escalating unheeded, many Egyptians still look to the government as the main source of protection as well as misfortune.

The legacy of this social contract has also contributed to the tendency of many ordinary urban Egyptians to seek individualistic solutions to their problems. At the same time, the lack of solidarity among the different strata of the poor undermines broad scale social or political mobilization. More often than not, families of different social strata tend to compete when resources are scarce. In Cairo, this is more so in the new and heterogeneous communities (such as Dar al-Salam or Kafr Seif) than in the Old City neighborhoods where the relative ho-

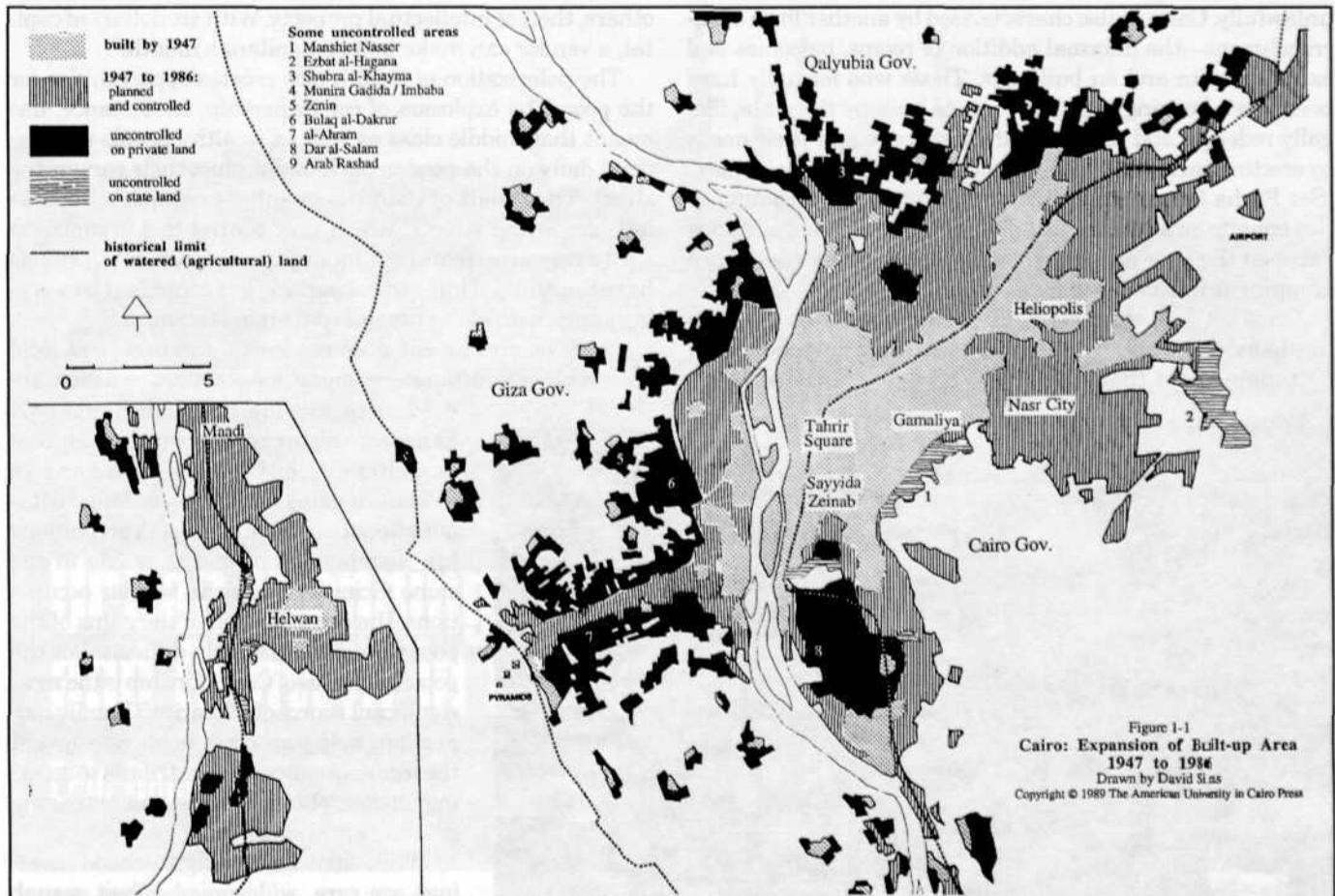


Figure 1-1  
Cairo: Expansion of Built-up Area  
1947 to 1986  
Drawn by David Sims  
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Cairo.

David Sims, *A Place to Live*/The American University in Cairo Press

mogeneity of inhabitants and the longevity of residence have produced a spatial identity. The coexistence of identifiable strata in a community (such as Kafr Seif where “villagers,” “newcomers,” “shanty-dwellers” and “tent-dwellers” live side by side) sharpens the existing competition and leads to conflicts. In Kafr Seif, “villagers” feared that “shanty-dwellers” and “tent-dwellers” would jeopardize their own insecure position; the latter groups remained silent so as to not be noticed by the municipality. Consequently, with solidarity being intangible among the many poor Cairenes, recourse to the state—the provider and the punisher—becomes an alternative way to achieve their goals. Many of them know, however, that the bureaucracy is unable or unwilling to respond formally to the growing demands of the urban poor. Thus, they tend to seek informal, individualistic and opportunistic ways of cultivating officials.

## Quiet Encroachment

The dearth of cooperative and contentious collective action on the part of the Egyptian urban poor by no means implies a lack of grassroots activism. Conditioned by political and cultural constraints, the poor instead resort to an alternative strategy—that of quiet encroachment. Qualitatively different from defensive measures or coping mechanisms, this strategy represents a silent, protracted, pervasive advancement of ordinary people—through open-ended and fleeting struggles without

clear leadership, ideology or structured organization—on the propertied and powerful in order to survive. While these types of grassroots activities are not social movements, they are also distinct from survival strategies or “everyday resistance” in that the struggles and gains of the agents are not at the cost of their fellow poor or themselves, but of the state, the rich and the powerful. In this type of struggle, the poor, to provide light for their shelter, tap electricity not from their neighbors, but from the municipality; or instead of putting their children to work to raise their living standard they demand higher pay from their employers. These struggles are not necessarily defensive, but cumulatively encroaching—the actors tend to expand their space by winning new positions from which to move. In this sense, they do not constitute “accommodating protest”<sup>15</sup> since, first, they are not conscious acts of protest, but rather represent the way people live their lives. This quiet encroachment challenges many fundamental aspects of the state’s prerogatives—including the meaning of order, control of public space, the importance of modernity, and finally, the state’s encroachment on private property.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, to escape from high rents, millions of rural migrants and the urban poor in Cairo have quietly claimed state/public lands and cemeteries on the outskirts of the city, creating largely autonomous communities. Greater Cairo contains more than 111 *ashwa’iyyat* (spontaneous communities) that house over six million people who have put up their shelters

unlawfully. Cairo is also characterized by another form of encroachment—the informal addition of rooms, balconies and extra space in and on buildings. Those who formally have been given housing in public projects built by the state, illegally redesign and rearrange their space to suit their needs by erecting partitions, and by adding and inventing new space. (See Farha Ghannam in this issue.) Often whole communities emerge as a result of intense struggles and negotiations between the poor and others in their daily lives. (See Petra Kuppinger in this issue.)

Once settled, slum dwellers try to force state authorities to extend water and electricity to their neighborhoods by tapping into them illegally.<sup>17</sup> A cursory look at Cairo

others, theft of intellectual property. With six dollars of capital, a vendor can make up to 55 dollars a month.<sup>19</sup>

The polarization of wealth also creates opportunities for the poor. The explosion of car ownership, for instance, has meant that middle class as well as wealthy people now depend daily on the poor to park and protect their cars in the street. Thousands of Cairo's poor subsist on tips from parking cars in the streets, which they control and organize in such a way as to create maximum parking space. Many streets have thus turned into virtual parking lots controlled by working gangs with elaborate internal organization.

Quiet encroachment does not mean an absence of local networks, organizations or oppositional collective action. In-

deed, networks are established, not only as a mechanism to ensure survival and encroachment, but also as a means to safeguard gains already won. Thus, without support from and cooperation among kin members who tend to reside in the same vicinity or work in similar occupations, the consolidation of the gains of the poor would be extremely difficult. For the popular classes of Cairo, kinship is the most significant source of solidarity.<sup>20</sup> Family connections help poor households circumvent the legal/bureaucratic constraints to securing shelter, obtaining jobs and extending governmental subsidies.

While structured neighborhood meetings are rare, widespread, albeit casual, networks ensure the flow of information among community members. Although people rarely elect their local leaders, nevertheless, charismatic leaders do emerge out of seemingly inactive communities. Similarly, in the domain of work, although the spread of street vending takes place on a largely individual basis, security is en-

sured by spatial networks embodied in "market sheikhs." These informal leaders, selected by their seniority, experience and skill, mediate between the vendors and the government/public. Their strategy of quiet diplomacy among the "informal market sheikhs" is probably more effective than the formal approaches of the official vendors' union.<sup>21</sup>

Traditional practices, solidarities and leaders thus have taken the place of and perform some of the functions of more structured neighborhood organizations found in other societies. But quiet encroachment as a type of grassroots activism has both its costs as well as its advantages. It represents a sustained, albeit silent, encroachment, that is largely unlawful and runs the constant risk of suppression. As fluid and unstructured forms of activism, these largely atomistic strategies have the advantages of flexibility and versatility; but they fall short of developing legal, technical and organizational support needed to advance the search for social justice on the broader, national level. ■

*Endnotes on page 12.*



**Elections in Sayyida Zeinab, Cairo.**

Marsha Pripstein

communities such as Dar al-Salam, Ezbat Sadat, Ezbat Khairullah, Ezbat Nasr and Basaatin provides evidence of this widespread phenomenon. In late April 1996, the municipality reported that it had cut off 800 illegal electricity lines in Cairo's Dar al-Salam and Basaatin communities in one raid alone.<sup>18</sup>

In the domain of employment, street subsistence workers have quietly taken over public thoroughfares to conduct their business in the vast parallel economy. Well over 200,000 street vendors have occupied the streets in Cairo's main commercial centers, encroaching on favorable business opportunities created by local shopkeepers. Many streets around major shopping areas in the neighborhoods of Muski, al-Husayn, Embaba, Sayyida Zeinab, Boulaq and Abul-Alaa have been transformed into street bazaars, through some of which vehicles can no longer venture. Informality means that not only are the agents generally free from the costs of formality (taxes, regulation and so forth), they can also benefit from the piracy of import commodities and, like many

4 *Egypt Human Development Report 1995*, The Institute of National Planning (Cairo, 1996); Karima Korayem, *Poverty and Income Distribution in Egypt*, (Cairo: Third World Forum, Middle East Office, 1994).

5 The average return on investment per year in 1993 was more than 37.7 percent, and more than 157.9 percent in 1994, as opposed to more than 24 percent and less than 8.4 percent in France, in Great Britain more than 17.2 percent and less than 6.4 percent, in Mexico more than 46.1 percent and less than 22.9 percent and in Brazil more than 155.9 percent and 77.7 percent. In Egypt, these performances still benefit from a weak rate of inflation for an emerging market (countries whose GDP per capita is between \$500 and \$15,000 per year), *Business Monthly* 11/2, (Cairo: American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, 1995).

6 Milad Hanna, *al-Iskan wa al-Masyada*, (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 1987; French translation, CEDEJ, Cairo, 1992). The author emphasizes the paradox of housing without inhabitants and inhabitants without housing.

7 *Metropolitan Planning and Management in the Developing World: Spatial Decentralization Policy in Bombay and Cairo*, (Nairobi: United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, 1993); James B. Mayfield, *Local Government in Egypt*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1996).

8 Diane Singerman *Avenues of Participation, Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

9 Robert Lopez, "Hautes murailles pour villes de riches," *Le Monde Diplomatique* 503, March 1996.

10 John Waterbury, *Take the Bus and Leave the Driving to Us*, Northeast Africa Series 21/2 (1976).

11 Alain Roussillon, *Comme si la ville était divisée en deux: un regard réformiste sur l'urbain en Égypte au tournant des années 1940*, (Genève, No. 22, Paris, 1996).

12 Milad Hanna, *al-Iskan wa al-Siyasa* (The Housing and the Politic), (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1996). Not all the hazardous zones have the same social and architectural characteristics. There is, in reality, housing that is normal and healthy in spite of the fact that it is neither planned nor legal. Some of it is in completely good condition and it should be recognized that without it, several thousand families could not have integrated, married and found employment (p. 183).

13 *Al-Taqrir al-Istratiji al-Arabi 1995* (Arab Strategic Report 1995), Cairo: Al-Ahram, 1996, the report devotes more than 20 pages to the political question of the informal neighborhoods.

14 Immanuel Wallerstein, "Heritage of Myrdal: The Dilemma of Racism and Under-Development," in *Unthinking Social Science, the Limits of Nineteenth Century Paradigms*, (Polity Press, 1991).

15 Iman Farag, "L'enseignement en Égypte, économie politique d'une libéralisation annoncée in *Âge libéral et néo libéralisme* (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1996).

average rural household (with 5.2 members) was LE 3334.2. As for the urban "ultra-poor" (with 4.6 household members), the figure was LE 1933.8 and for rural areas (with 5.2 members) LE 2186.1; see *ibid.*, p. 10.

4 This notion of urban poor draws on Peter Worsley's definition in his *The Three Worlds*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984).

5 For analysis of the Social Fund see Korayem, *ibid.*, p. 50.

6 See, for instance, *Grassroots Participation in Egypt*, (Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1995), sponsored by the Cairo office of UNICEF; see also Maha Mahfouz, "Community Development in Egypt," unpublished MA thesis, The American University in Cairo, 1992.

7 A compilation of these methods is available in Alyaa Shoukry, *Poverty and Adaption Mechanism: A Sociological Approach on Research in Egypt during the 1980s*, (Cairo: UNICEF, 1993).

8 See the research of Hopkins and Mehanna in this issue.

9 See Anthony DePalma, "Income Gap in Mexico Grows, and So Do Protests," *New York Times*, July 20, 1996, p. 3. According to the same article citing United Nations and the World Bank reports, "the richest 10 percent of Mexicans earn 41 percent of the country's income, while the bottom half of the population earns only 16 percent of all national income."

10 In 1991, the top 20 percent of the population earned about 50 percent of the country's income, while the bottom 40 percent earned only 13.4 percent; see Ali Akbar Karbasian, "The Process of Income Distribution in Iran," in *Iran-e Farda* 17, Ordibehesht 1374/1995, p. 44 (in Farsi).

11 For an analysis of these events see Asef Bayat, "Squatters and the State: Back Street Politics in the Islamic Republic," *Middle East Report* 191 (November-December, 1994), pp. 10-14.

12 For instance, when in 1960, the Cairo Governorate began to evict the settlers of today's Manshiet Nasser from their earlier squatter community (Ezbat al-Safis, close to the Gamaliya neighborhood) deputies of the National Assembly from the district represented not the community but the government, negotiating with the local informal community leaders. See Belgin Tekke, Linda Oldham and Frederic Shorter, *A Place to Live: Families and Child Care in a Cairo Neighborhood*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994), pp. 23-25.

13 For evidence of this see Amani Qandil and Sarah Ben Nafisah, *Al-Gamiyyat Al-Ahli Fi Al-Misr*, (Cairo: Al-Ahram Strategic Studies, 1995). See also Denis Sullivan, *Private Voluntary Organizations in Egypt: Islamic Developments, Private Initiative and State Control*, (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1994), pp. 64-84.

14 See John Cross, *Informal Politics: Street Vendors and the State in Mexico City*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

15 Arlene Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1991).

16 For a theoretical elaboration of "quiet encroachment," see Asef Bayat, "The Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary: The Politics of the 'Informal People,'" *Third World Quarterly* 18/1, March 1997. For a more comprehensive discussion with reference to the experience of Iran see Asef bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran, 1977-1990*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, forthcoming).

17 For an interesting report see Mariz Tadros, "Unhomely Homes," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, October 17-23, 1996.

18 *Akhbar Al-Maadi*, May 1, 1996.

19 See Emad Mekay, "Necessity is the Mother of Invention," *Ru'ya* 9, Summer 1996, p. 20.

20 For a detailed study of networks in popular Cairo neighborhoods, see Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

21 For more on the market sheikhs see H. Tadros, M. Fateeha and A. Hipbard, "Squatter Markets in Cairo," in *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 13/1, Spring 1990, p. 62.

Continued from Bayat on page 6.

## Endnotes

1 According to Egyptian economist Karima Korayem, the richest of urban households (the top 10 percent) which controlled about 26 percent of disposable income in 1981 had, by 1991, increased their share to 32.6 percent. See Karima Korayem, "Structural Adjustment, Stabilization Policies, and the Poor in Egypt," in *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 18/4 Winter 1995/6, table 4, p. 26.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

3 These data are estimated for the urban areas of the governorates of Cairo and Giza; see *ibid.*, p. 19, table 2. In this study, the expenditure poverty line for the average urban households (of 4.6 members) was considered to be LE 3347.4 annual income, and the

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