

## **“State Analysis from Below” and Political Dynamics in Egypt after 2011**

**CILJA HARDERS**

Department of Political and Social Sciences, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany; e-mail: [charders@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:charders@zedat.fu-berlin.de)

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Political scientists have struggled to understand the unexpected 2011 mass mobilizations in the Middle East and North Africa as well as ensuing sociopolitical transformations. Functionalist and regime-centered approaches in particular have been unable to grasp dynamics of mobilization and change on the ground. I argue in this short essay that “state analysis from below” helps us to better understand the underlying causes of the 2011 uprisings, the dynamics of ensuing power struggles, and sociopolitical microstructures of political mobilization and demobilization.

Regime-centered approaches have proven inadequate precisely because they focus exclusively on formal institutions and elite actors. The massive social change that came with demographic change, increased access to information, unequal economic development, and the rise of nonstate actors in the region prior to 2011 was not accompanied by comprehensive liberalization or even democratization of political systems. By contrast, a “state analysis from below” can help us to capture not only this “transformation without transition,” but also how it led to a widening gap between dynamic societies and ossified regimes that gave rise to a crisis of legitimacy and ultimately revolutionary mobilization. In addition, this perspective sheds light on the local dynamics of mobilization in informal networks, which are crucial for forging coalitions and withstanding violent repression. Finally, the actor-oriented approach presented here helps us understand the affective and emotional dynamics of both the occupation of Tahrir in 2011 and the outbreak of violence in 2013.

The uprisings of 2011, as well as the ensuing and ongoing transformations in the region, are rooted in earlier practices of small scale, localized, and formal and informal forms of politics, which often occur “beyond the center.” In our recent volume, Anja Hoffmann, Malika Bouziane, and I start from the basic assumption that so-called peripheral spaces and seemingly marginal actors have been vital in triggering major change on the regime level.<sup>1</sup> Thus, years before the 2011 mass mobilizations, local (and, to be sure, national) authoritarian governance was not only reproduced on the local level but also contested there. The “local,” I hold, is a political space, a testing and contested ground for changing state-society relations, and thus deserves close scrutiny.

“State analysis from below” examines local issues because it is on the local level that power relations and abstract concepts such as “the state,” “governance,” and “politics” take concrete form.<sup>2</sup> Rather than focusing on formal institutions and organizations, national arenas, and political elites, this approach looks at dynamic and contradictory state-society relations. Moreover, instead of assuming that the state and its agents deliver public services and contribute to the welfare, security, and inclusion of citizens, it starts from the local practices of an “everyday state”<sup>3</sup> with limited hegemony in which networks, as “institutions of the people,”<sup>4</sup> play a major role. The everyday state is a space of power struggles structured by a social contract. These struggles constitute “politics”

in the broad sense of the word and can be captured empirically by, for example, studying political participation or interactions between citizens and local authorities. Political participation includes informal, individual, hidden, illegal, and “nonpolitical” actions and networks, as well as organized, public collective actions inside and outside of institutionalized frameworks. State analysis from below pays special attention to how class, race, ethnicity, and gender structure access to and use of specific resource flows and participation patterns. As structured power relations, state–society relations are embedded in a social contract. They are regulated according to certain general rules or “logics of action,” which in the Egyptian case entails an implicit “deal” of political acquiescence for access to welfare. The uprising of 2011 and the ensuing power struggles are part of a process of renegotiating this social contract.

During the uprisings of 2011 in Egypt and elsewhere, protestors widely adopted the slogan “*al-sha‘b yurid isqāt al-nīzām*” (the people want to bring down the system). I argue that the *nīzām* they sought to bring down is best described as an authoritarian “social contract of informality.”<sup>5</sup> In exchange for political demobilization, this contract offers not citizenship rights but rather space for informal types of agency and participation. In the face of ongoing economic and political challenges, regimes in the region relied on five major adaptation and modernization strategies: informalization, islamization, repression, limited economic liberalization, and limited political liberalization. Informalization became a distinctive feature of state–society relations over the last fifteen years—hence my characterization of the social contract being a “social contract of informality.” Post-2011 political dynamics are intensely contested efforts to renegotiate the contract and underlying logics of action.

Looking at the Egyptian revolution from the local perspective illuminates microdynamics of mobilization and demobilization. The incredible political energy that accompanied the popular efforts to reappropriate the state from the local and national elites in power after 2011 involved a huge array of community-oriented activities in which citizens took urgent issues into their own hands. According to my own fieldwork conducted in 2012 and 2013 and to other available studies, informalization was greatly strengthened on three levels in the absence of reliable public institutions.<sup>6</sup> First, newly won spaces for political activism were filled by different kinds of local groups, including not only revolutionary youth but also formerly clandestine but now reemergent Salafi groups. Second, the reappropriation of public spaces by the poor, a process which was aptly coined “quiet encroachment” by Asef Bayat already in 1997, greatly intensified, as can be seen in the growth of informal trade in downtown Cairo.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, affluent Egyptians took advantage of the absence of regulatory and sanctioning power by pursuing unlicensed construction on agricultural land or adding new floors to their buildings, much to the dismay of neighbors and/or tenants. Such unlicensed construction activities also included the building up of pedestrian access to the Cairo ring road and even of streets leading up to the ring road in 2011–12, thus connecting formerly marginalized communities to Cairo’s main traffic hubs.<sup>8</sup>

Self-organized local politics and security started on 28 January 2011, when residents in Cairo and other cities activated their neighborhood networks in order to set up *lijān sha‘biyya* (popular committees). The aim was to safeguard one’s life and assets under circumstances of extreme uncertainty and repression. The *lijān sha‘biyya* assumed security functions on a local scale during critical periods of mass mobilization in January and

February 2011 and beyond, undermining attempts of some regime elites to purposefully incite chaos, destabilization, and violence by removing regular police.

After the 18 days of Tahrir, the paths of the popular committees immediately diverged: some disbanded, some formalized or merged with newly established parties, and some proceeded in a revolutionary spirit, such as the *mahalliyāt thawriyya* (revolutionary local initiative), which worked to change the system of local governance and local awareness. During my own research, especially vulnerable interviewees presented proud stories of self-empowerment and successful conflict with the local administration over water and electricity shortages during the first year of the post-Mubarak transformation. They found local solutions to local problems, such as streets in need of paving and missing access to the city's cooking pipelines, and even acted in place of the dissolved local councils.<sup>9</sup> But by November 2012, the mood was overwhelmingly gloomy and highly critical of president Mursi and the government. Activists I interviewed were also frustrated with the often service-oriented attitude of the population and the ways in which political forces exploited it. As one activist pointed out to me when discussing the difference between his committee's work and the charity work of the Muslim Brotherhood on the ground: "They are giving the people fish, we want to teach them how to fish."<sup>10</sup>

Political divisions intensified during the 2012 electoral campaigns for parliament and the presidency. Activists joined various parties, and parties competed for locally embedded actors in order to enhance their electoral success on the ground—just as in Mubarak's time. Many popular committees and youth initiatives later became involved in the Tamarrud campaigns and nonviolent efforts to oust president Mursi. In the bloody summer of 2013, some of them turned into direct support groups for al-Sisi. Many people have since retracted from politics in the face of repression and polarization, which destroyed earlier personal or political bonds. Others turned to development activities after more transformative political action was once again criminalized. The impressive rise of informal and formal political activism on the local scale was followed by a deep structural resistance to change on the part of local authorities. Even before the summer of 2013, the old hierarchies between local authorities and the local population seemed to be fully reestablished. Much of the old contempt and neglect on the part of the middle classes and the new and old political elites towards the poor, uneducated, and informalized inhabitants of urban quarters and rural villages persists.

Summing up, "state analysis from below" helps us to differentiate three dimensions of the local: first, it is a place where the networks of mobilization and participation materialize; second, local networks can have compensatory functions when state institutions and actors evaporate and disappear; third, these informal structures are both a building ground for new mobilization and political change and a repository for authoritarian practices and attitudes. Thus, there is a link between these microlevel dynamics and the macrolevel developments in Egypt and beyond. The violent power struggles between contending elites in many "Arab Spring" countries such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen come with rapidly evolving geopolitical transformations in the region in 2014. The approach proposed here is to analyze the (re)emergence of extremist Islamist movements in the region, for example, as locally rooted transnational phenomena so as to develop a more nuanced picture of these most recent developments. It would look at the local dynamics of mobilization around these groups and at the way local dynamics of violence translate into broader struggles over statehood and political control. Since Mubarak's

ouster, informality as a central feature of the social contract has been strongly revived and reshaped. When discussing the lack of social justice, freedom, and dignity in Egypt, my interviewees in informal areas of Cairo constantly refer to “the state.” However, the state seems to have become even more elusive than before. Levels of repression and localized violence have been high under all regimes since 2011. So far, the structure of the social contract of informality and major strategies for wielding power have not changed substantially. Nevertheless, many dedicated actors relentlessly struggle to reach deeper change even under conditions of political closure and repression.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>Cilja Harders, “Bringing the Local Back In: Local Politics between Informalization and Mobilization in an Age of Transformation in Egypt,” in *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World*, 113–36.

<sup>3</sup>Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup>Cilja Harders “A revolution of logics of action? Renegotiating the authoritarian social contract in Egypt,” in *Euro-Med Relations after the Arab Spring: Persistence in Times of Change*, ed. Jakob Horst, Annette Jünemann, and Delf Rothe (London: Ashgate, 2013), 103–22.

<sup>6</sup>See *Egypte-Monde Arabe* no. 11 (2014), Ville et révolution en Egypte, <http://ema.revues.org/3255>.

<sup>7</sup>Asef Bayat, “Un-Civil Society: The Politics of the ‘Informal People,’” *Third World Quarterly* 18 (1997): 53–72.

<sup>8</sup>Kareem Ibrahim and Diane Singerman, “Urban Egypt: On the Road from Revolution to the State? Governance, the Built Environment, and Social Justice,” in *Egypte-Monde Arabe* no. 11 (2014), <http://ema.revues.org/3255>; Beth Stryker, Omar Nagati, and Magda Mostafa, eds. *Learning from Cairo: Global Perspectives and Future Visions* (Cairo: AUC and CLUSTER, 2013).

<sup>9</sup>Asya El-Meehy “Egypt’s Popular Committees,” in *Middle East Report* 42 (2014): 265, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer265/egypts-popular-committees>; Ibrahim and Singerman, “Urban Egypt,” 2014.

<sup>10</sup>Activist who wished to remain anonymous, author’s interview, Cairo, 2012.