



AGA KHAN PROGRAM FOR ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

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THE EGYPTIAN LABOR MOVEMENT IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD AND BEYOND

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INTRODUCTION + OBJECTIVES

Over the summer 2012 I travelled to Cairo, Egypt on a trip sponsored by the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture. While on this trip I conducted the bulk of my research related to my master's thesis. With a follow up trip sponsored by MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning in January 2013, the research interviews conducted on these two trips formed the original research component of my thesis on Egypt's labor movements and institution building and change.

The aim of both trips to Cairo was to conduct interviews with labor organizers from independent unions established within the last 2 years. I hoped to gain an understanding of the circumstances of this particular cross-section of Egyptian social movements leading up to, and participating in the January 25, 2011 Revolution. I hoped to embed this within an understanding of the political economy of labor organization since Egypt's independence from colonial control in 1952.

Over the summer I formed strong contacts in the fields of social and economic rights, journalists covering labor issues, and labor organizers. NGOs like the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, and the Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights, provided the bulk of the background and helped me understand the links between ideology-based social organizations and labor unions. I also met with a few independent union members, and one municipal level organizer from Alexandria. Many of the journalists I met with had followed union issues for years if not decades, and could provide both contacts, and general reflections on the relationship between political parties, national government, firms, and unions. Returning over IAP I spent time following up with some of the same journalists, but reaching out to more independent unions through a contact at ECESR, which has collected a database of the more than 1000 independent unions that have formed since 2009 in response to the state-based unions of the past.

To speak more generally about social organization, in my last two trips I have observed the articulation of shared demands by several cross-sections of Egyptian society, namely demands related to housing and the price of necessary commodities like bread and fuel. I hoped my interviews would prove this observation to be robust.

BACKGROUND

My thesis is premised an economic argument that beginning in the 1970s, development was oriented in a direction that entailed significant pressure on labor, particularly low-wage workers. At the same time, shifts in production, in accord with preferences set by national policy, triggered significant increases in the prices of common and necessary commodities such as wheat and fuel. Expectations of government provided subsidies were set in place in the 1950s, yet by the late 1970s, the Egyptian balance of payments and conditions related to prior loans prevented the national government from caring for its citizens in ways the prior regime had. This left the state faced with significant pressure from creditor institutions, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to engage in significant structural adjustment, and pressure from civil society to retain precious subsidies. The 1970s onward witnessed a growth in labor action in the form of wildcat strikes taking place without the formal authorization of the state backed unions. In the mid 1960s Gamal Abdel Nasser established the Egyptian Trade Union Federation with the aim of giving workers representation, but intentionally couching this representation comfortably within the control of the central government. Though labor actions were more frequent there was little to no structure for organization, and significant opposition from the state unions.

METHODOLOGY

When I left for Cairo in June I had only two social contacts from my hometown and college, and introductions via e-mail. I had worked diligently on a literature review, but was unsure what to expect. The runoff phase of presidential elections was set to take place two weeks after I arrived and already there was speculation over the legitimacy of several eliminated candidates. I expected significant time would need to be allocated to orienting myself, as well as establishing a strong network of interviewees. Fortunately I found everyone I spoke to incredibly friendly, helpful and willing to talk as well as share contact information for further interview subjects.

I began my research by interviewing NGO employees I had been introduced through over email through my advisor. Starting with 3 contacts within NGOs and the American University of Cairo, I ultimately met with 15 NGO workers, journalists, labor organizers, and urban design professionals, and corresponded with many more through e-mail. What is more, these contacts served as the foundation for subsequent interviews with independent union leaders in January 2013.

While I expected this research to prove challenging – I had heard rumors of arrests of foreign journalists researching labor activities – I did not anticipate the challenge of navigating interviews and meetings through massive protests every Friday and the swelter of tension leading up to, and the eventual chaotic celebrations for the announcement of Mohammed Morsi as the first democratically elected president. Protests after the late June announcement called on Morsi to make immediate reform, particularly related to work conditions; and towards the end of the summer, demonstrations related to power and water outages were mounting.

ANALYSIS: A BROAD OUTLINE

Drawing on the information learned in the course of these interviews, my thesis argues social movements, beyond labor alone, are acting together to ameliorate their immediate material demands. I focus on the independent unions, understanding that they constitute a significant strategic innovation of the Revolutionary period, and are engaging in a process of learning through political action. In addition to learning from the experience of other unions, many are exercising democratic principles and an interest in providing meaningful representation of fellow workers.

While the current climate is built on political economy that squeezed workers in the name of competitive advantage, there are clear relationships between worker demands and demands for housing and food. The vast literature on Egypt's modernization focuses largely on macro-economic policy and urban development. Against this macro-development, I intend to map out the work independent unions are doing, and argue they occupy a niche, claiming general demands for political change and material welfare in the interest of quality of life, both from the central government, but also from firm management.

One of the most frequent complaints lodged against the independent labor movement is myopia that keeps these workers from situating their demands in concrete political terms. The argument goes that labor interests are pernicious and self-serving at worst, and politically self-defeating at best. In response to these claims, however, many journalists and workers themselves argue their demands are political. This argument is closely corroborated by the wave of protests I witnessed over the summer related to shortages of electricity and water. Both services are paid for by the wealthy and poor alike, and both services witnessed significant shortages during the summer of 2012. Shortages like these prompted protests by both

the middle-class and poor Egyptians alike, with chants echoing those cited from the 18 days of demonstrations in January 2011: “Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice!” The argument is that providing adequate and affordable material needs and should be a political priority, as it was in the days of Nasser. The alternate perception that unions are selfish and hoping to win higher wages are countered by journalists with intimate knowledge of worker demonstrations. Many of the demands made in recent strikes as of Winter 2013, but generally within the last two years, are for fair firm governance. Workers do not strike for higher wages alone, but to remove corrupt management, and eliminate waste within firms. Many of these firms are publicly operated, so in effect these unions are demonstrating to eliminate some small measure of corruption in public administration.

Finally, legislation heretofore has been anti-union. It is still not legal to establish unions in competition with the ETUF state-sanctioned unions, so members of these independent unions join and demonstration at great personal risk, though the government has yet to take harsh action against them. There have, however, been propaganda campaigns launched painting these workers’ movements as selfish and risking the gains of the Revolution for the sake of higher wages in state owned newspapers. Similarly, appeals have been made encouraging workers to accept their duty as citizens and push forward the wheel of work for the sake of the Egyptian macro-economy. This appeal to workers mirrors the rhetoric of working-class glorification of Nasser’s government, but the rhetoric of sacrifices has thus far been met with resistance, and the suggestion by workers that the goals of the Revolution must be realized in order for the economy to grow in a way that is fair and provides for workers’ material needs.

While documenting the grievances of the workers represented by independent unions and their reasons for striking, I gained a very real appreciation for the links to other movements within Egyptian society. It is my sincere hope that as the demonstrations of the workers in independent unions continue to gain public attention in the face of significant governance short-fallings at the national, municipal and firm level, other cross sections of society will begin to identify common points of contention and collaborate to exert political pressure on a broken system. While many of these movements lack credible political allies, it is my hope that rather than episodic revolution, democratic elections will moderate the levels of corruption and agnosticism towards the poor and working classes.

While the unions I spoke to are not representative of the whole of the labor force, they provide interesting cases for consideration. It is important to remember that of the over 1000 unions active today, I was able to meet with 10. While my contact at ECSER suggested these are the most active and successful unions, the lessons to be gleaned are important, but limited in terms of generalizability.

PUBLIC TRANSIT WORKERS: AN EXAMPLE

Before leaving at the end of the summer I met with three representatives from the Cairo public transit workers’ union, which does not include the Cairo metro. These workers are bus drivers and ticket-takers; they are management; and they perform service and maintenance work. This union covered the entire Greater Cairo metro area, so included administrative units in Cairo, Giza and Qalubiyah. There are approximately 40 thousand public transit workers, with approximately 18 thousand members in the independent union and 11 thousand in the state union. Unlike many other industries, formal membership in the state union is not compulsory for independent union members. In most industries dues are automatically deducted from every employee’s earning stubs, however transit workers can elect to have their dues applied toward the independent union instead. The public transit workers formed their independent union on the 24th of March, 2011, filing the necessary paperwork with the Ministry of Manpower, making the required bank deposit, and holding a press conference to announce their formation.

According to these representatives this union has gone on two prominent strikes, the first timed to coincide with the start of the school semester in mid-September. This strike lasted until early October, and advocated for related to irregular wages. The second strike lasted 10 days in March 2012 at a time of rising prices and shortages of diesel, the strategy being that there were no good alternatives to public transportation owing to high fuel prices. Both of these strikes were resolved successfully, with the union winning significant bonuses for workers over what they were being compensated previously.

The relevant gains are first in terms of witnessing a government structure respond to worker demands, and second in demonstrating the potential of collective organization, particularly in the face of past unions that were completely counterproductive in terms of workers' actual demands. The success of the two campaigns resulted in large numbers of transit workers joining the new union. On top of this potential, I was told this union leadership is elected democratically. I was shown the tally of votes from 27 different union branches.

This union is organized into a management board including a funding committee and general body. Elections designated the leadership structure, and the individuals I met with were the official spokesperson, the secretary, and a rank and file member. At the time of our meeting in June 2012, negotiations over leadership were ongoing. Though the union was committed to free and open elections, the structure of leadership positions proved to a point of contestation, particularly given the holdover power dynamics with the state union. Unfortunately, this dynamic is particularly violent, with the three men I spoke with all showing severe scars from the strikes held in either the fall of 2011 or spring 2012 as a result of violent suppression attempts by the state union. In fact, I was told the head of the state union for transport workers was the deputy of ETUF, and at a public meeting with President Morsi made a public speech attacking independent unions as barriers to economic growth.

The interviewee I spoke with also discussed goals of central government reform. He said, though the independent union is taken very seriously by the government, there are still significant hurdles in the form of corruption, in particular the head of the Ministry of Transport. The spokesperson was remarking on an upcoming meeting with newly elected President Morsi, though did not mention explicitly what the objectives for that meeting would be. I was also told of the recurrent conversation surrounding possible privatization of the public transportation apparatus. This has not happened yet, though these workers are aware that the possibility is far from remote. The difficulties of navigating which governmental department houses this industry.

Overall these union organizers were incredibly knowledgeable in terms of navigating government ministries. They also provided a high level of detail in terms of how pay was determined as a function of base salary and fines and bonuses allocated for a range of good or bad behaviors, though ultimately they emphasized that their wages were not nearly enough to comfortably cover their basic living expenses, particularly for a family with multiple children. While the underlying tone of our conversation focused on wages, it was clear the union leadership possessed a thorough understanding of how to navigate governmental institutions, and held a clear interest in advocating for fair and legitimate exercise of authority. It is no exaggeration to say one of the primary goals of this union is a less corrupt, and more efficient governance apparatus.

CONCLUSION

The work independent unions are doing to articulate their demands collectively and exercise democratic organization is significant in the post-2011 Revolution period. Many of these unions, though not all, are providing robust representation of constituent worker demands and a rich process of learning is taking place. Unions share strategy with one another, and have learned best governance practices from the experience of others. Additionally, some unions have provided trainings and workshops, diffuse leadership structures, and in some cases regular newsletters updating members on campaign progress. Given the limited resources these unions are taking significant steps towards broader goals like worker education. Gradually, the view of union capacity is growing beyond demonstrations. I believe ultimately it is through the merger of demands for attention to material concerns as well as the function of government, that labor unions and broader segments of Egypt's social movement apparatus may push in the post-revolution phase for fair institutions to take form. The current period of stalled elections and sweeping decrees gives cause for cynicism, but the agency exercised by this segment of the labor force is hard to retract, and I believe independent unions will continue to demonstrate for their demands.

I would like to register my sincere thanks to the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, without whom this research and my Masters thesis would not be possible.