Starving those who feed us

Serene Assir investigates the negative effects of globalisation and agrarian reform on Egypt's rural population and the agricultural sector

Abdel-Samie Amin, a farmer from Al-Hurriya village in the Dikirmis district of Daqahliya governorate, sits barefoot in the home of his friend Abu Halawa El-Tohami, recounting the details of the dispossession that is the reality of Egypt's rural population. "We have always been poor," Amin told Al-Ahram Weekly. "But so long as we could rent some land, we never went hungry. Imagine having the land your family has tilled for decades taken away, by force. Imagine having the little land that I had—only two feddans [2 acres or 0.8 hectare]—taken away from me. Now I work on the same land for a daily wage of LE5. If I miss even one day, my family will go to bed hungry. That land may have been rented, but I put my life's work into it. Then in 1997, I woke up to nothing. Today I am nothing but a slave."

Fellow farmer Ismail Mohamed El-Sayed also faced expulsion from the land his family rented at controlled prices when the 1992/96 agrarian law reform was passed, depriving 6.5 million agricultural workers and their families of any means of sustenance whatsoever. "The agrarian law reform did us in," El-Sayed said. "Farmers know more about the land and farming than any landowner or investor. We also knew that as day-labourers, we would not be able to properly provide for our families. But to ensure our expulsion from the plots we had farmed for decades, the state used all the means available to it." At first, up until 1997, Amin refused to leave his land. He recounted that then the State Security forces imprisoned him and beat him. As a result of his beating, Amin is blind in one eye.

Agrarian reform as it stands today has its origins under the rule of the late president Anwar El-Sadat, but it was intensified under current President Hosni Mubarak, according to the director of the Cairo-based Land Centre for Human Rights (LCHR), Karam Saber. Until the 1952 Revolution the peasantry constituted the largest and poorest economic class in Egypt; however, the state started the redistribution of land in the 1950s, prohibiting in 1952 under law 178, for instance, the ownership by anyone of more than 200 feddans. Nor did land reform stop there, for under the late president Nasser, the general tendency was towards undercutting feudalism and the economic and social problems concentrated land ownership brought with it. By the end of Abdel-Nasser's regime, about 17 percent of the small farmers had directly benefited when the state allocated usually one to two feddans to each family. As for the rest, some of the benefit came in
the form of controlled tenancy rates, as well as minimum lease periods. More indirect but no less tangible improvements were also felt. "If the state had traditionally ignored the welfare of the peasantry completely, then under Nasser the countryside became one of the state's priorities," Saber told the Weekly.

But urban-rural inequalities continued, and the culture of feudalism still prevailed. After Nasser, the advance of the market economy undercut any incipient progress that had been achieved in rural Egypt. The liberalisation of the Egyptian economy with regards to the land was expressed through Sadat's partial reversal of land reform. It was not until Mubarak's era, however, that the reversal was completed, particularly with the passing of the infamous law 96 in 1992 and its full implementation starting in 1997, whereby the social safety nets introduced by law 157/1952 fixing rents at seven times the value of the land tax and prohibiting eviction of tenants were removed.

According to statistics published by the LCHR, between 1992 and 2005 yearly tenancy rates by 1997, freely set by landowners in accordance with the international market, increased by 20 times. Forced evictions spiralled, with the often bloody intervention of the State Security apparatus in what is known as the Peasants' Intifada (intifadat al-fallaheen) that mushroomed between 1997 and 2003. According to the LCHR, over the course of land disputes in 1997 alone around 100 farmers were killed and 1000 were injured while in 2004, 49 were killed and 429 were arrested. Such was the forcefulness of agrarian reform that in spite of resistance, almost one million tenants were evicted in the aftermath of the implementation of the law reform. "Given that the average rural family has five members, we are looking at the eviction of at least five million rural tenants and their families," Cairo-based Abdel-Mawla Ismail, researcher in civil society and agricultural development, told the Weekly.

The state's clampdown on the agricultural sector extends further than forced evictions. Part and parcel of agrarian reform has been the reinstatement of the "negative policy to marginalise the countryside," Saber said. "For the government today, the welfare of the small farmers is not at all on the agenda." Not alone in the resistance he has encountered, El-Tohami from Al-Hurriya felt first hand the pressures of the state over the course of his grassroots engagement in an attempt to provide a social support NGO to village residents. "We established an NGO purely from the contributions of the small farmers who were evicted from their land, to provide basic services that were completely lacking here, including healthcare," El-Tohami told the Weekly. Imprisoned in October 2007, he was forced to resign from the presidency of the NGO under police threats, as the NGO was perceived to have political goals.

Throughout the years since the first land reforms were passed in revolutionary Egypt, feudal families have lobbied hard to regain ownership of the lands that were seized from them, according to Joseph Schechla, coordinator of the Housing and Land Rights Network Habitat. Indeed with the market value of land rising sharply globally, it is little wonder that the prospect of reappropriating land should remain so financially appealing to the once landed class. Today a happening in the Nile Delta and wadi [valley] areas."

At the heart of this process, one that expresses a fundamental socioeconomic transformation, are the small farmers, who constitute 97 per cent of the total farming population of Egypt. And while it is true that many of the once landed families lobbied hard to regain the land they perceive as theirs by birthright, the reality is that the agrarian reform is more than counter-revolutionary. On the one hand, it is not square metre of farmland can fetch as much as LE5,000 in the Delta region. "If investment and profit are the goals of economic liberalisation, then agrarian policy per
se matters little today," said Ismail, warning of a much greater ill ahead than the mere return to feudalism. "Consequently, it is common for landowners to sell their land at high prices, and for that land to be given over for construction. What we are witnessing on the one hand is the transformation of arable land into urbanising villages, which are in turn being subsumed into neighbouring cities." According to Ismail, the phenomenon goes hand in hand with a lack of adequate housing or job opportunities in the cities, thereby prohibiting successful rural-urban migration, and instead creating an intensely poor quasi-urban environment in what was once farmland. "We have already seen the development of this phenomenon around Cairo, in areas that were once villages and have been turned into nothing less than urban slums," he added. "The same is only the former gentry who benefit. While small farmers such as Amin and El-Sayed subsist on less than $1 a day, putting them under the UN poverty line, agrarian policy is remodelled to produce crops for export. "In the short run, investment in what remains of agriculture becomes focused on exporting because it is more profitable," Ismail told the Weekly. "In the long run, however, this policy is not in fact sustainable." For while the country's deregulated agricultural producers turn to exporting luxury products including herbs and flowers, which have strong markets in the West, the country is left to importing basic food products. "To the Romans, Egypt was perceived as the food basket of the world. That we now rely on imports for 40 per cent of our wheat, for instance, is shocking news," Ismail added.

So it is that in a deregulated economic atmosphere, the 21 century landlord escapes definition per se, called owners, buyers and investors, including individuals, companies, and even state ministries. Where competition rules, the common denominator is that the winner in agrarian law reform is the highest bidder at any given moment, albeit with corruption included in the formula, according to Saber. Thus, what is happening now with the invasion of the "market" into the countryside is more than just a counter-revolution or a return to the past; "agrarian reform is an integral part of the drive for globalisation itself, a drive directed by the United States," he added.

Meanwhile, analysts agree that as part of the liberalisation of the agrarian sector, productivity has gone down. Indicators issued by the government may indicate development, but according to Saber and Ismail official figures do not tell the whole story. "In isolation the figures may look promising but it would not be accurate to look at the profits made by an elite minority if we do not take into consideration the massive poverty that accompanies the process," said Ismail. "What we are effectively witnessing is the rapid, unregulated destruction of the agricultural sector, regardless of whether short-term profits indicate profits."

Today, it is the small farmers who bear the cost of the burden of agrarian reform. Inhabitants of rural Egypt already suffer from unemployment, with conservative estimates at 20 per cent, poverty, poor access to services including health and education, and poor levels of participation in the socio-political development of the countryside. Women farmers, who constitute 40 per cent of small farmers, are also suffering as a result of rising unemployment, as they are unable to find new work once they become landless. In the longer term, as rural Egypt continues to be sold off piece by piece, and urbanisation continues, Ismail estimates that within 100 years there may not be any farmland left in Egypt at all. To Schechla and other Cairo-based analysts, the indicators bode ill -- and not for the small farmers alone. "We are witnessing the destructive effects of globalisation on agriculture across the world today, from India and Brazil to Egypt. Across the world we see the problem of disappearing peasantries," said Schechla. "The ideology of privatisation is based on weakening the state. Historically, the farmers have constituted the backbone of the Egyptian state. For the good of the country, the policies that are leading to the destruction of the countryside are taking Egypt towards an avoidable natural disaster -- and for the good of the country these policies need to be reversed."
To the small farmers, the struggle to reverse the drive for privatisation has long been ongoing. Among them is Mohamed Abdel-Ghani, who after serving in the Egyptian Army after the Yemeni revolution in 1962, lived on the two feddans granted to him after his service, and which he long rented at controlled tenancy rates. "Now the plot of land, along with that of four other veterans and our families, is about to be privatised, to be treated as the property of the Ministry of Awqaf [Endowments]," Abdel-Ghani told the Weekly. "The rental price will spiral like it has for so many others. This is my land -- I work on it, do something good by it. I fought on behalf of the state once. I can see where the reform is going to take me and my family, and it will be to our ruin. I can tell you now that I will not let our situation get any worse. If they want to evict me, they're going to have to kill me."

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