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Recommended Citation

Brooks, F., & Jaunzems, T. (2011). Community organizing in Egypt during and after the revolution. *Social Policy*, 41(4), 58-61.

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Community Organizing in Egypt During and After the Revolution

By FRED BROOKS & TATIANA JAUNZEMS

The Egyptian revolution that took place over 18 days in January and February of 2011 attracted international attention and coverage for several reasons. Not only was the world excited and inspired by the massive crowds in Tahrir Square, standing up, uncompromisingly, for their beliefs, but it instilled in people the sense that justice and change are truly possible. The Organizers' Forum provided a unique opportunity for North American organizers to hear from their brothers and sisters in Egypt, not only exhilarating stories about the strategies and tactics they used to oust Mubarak, but also the sobering challenges facing organizers today during the slow transition to democracy.

Special Report from the Organizers' Forum on the International Dialogue in Egypt

The Organizer's Forum in Cairo occurred seven months after Mubarak's toppling, and while most organizers we met were optimistic about the future prospects for democracy and community organizing, the positive feelings were combined with apprehension and uncertainty about the present and near future. One activist stated "everything has changed, and nothing has changed." Since the military has been running the government since February the heads of most government agencies have changed, but the remainder of the massive bureaucracies have not changed in terms of personnel or policy resulting in stasis as the above quotation suggests.

During the Mubarak regime there was very little community organizing activity that was unrelated to religious organizations. An environmental activist from Cairo, Rebecca Porteus, described organizing during the Mubarak regime as extremely frustrating. According to Porteus, "Before the revolution no matter the issue you'd find organizing led nowhere.

You eventually would pay your way out of the problem." Apparently corruption was so endemic the only way to win a campaign was to pay someone off. Another woman, who was working with an NGO post-revolution, stated that under the old regime she was so thoroughly disgusted with politics and corruption she had given up completely on the idea of positive reform. She had worked for an NGO (during the Mubarak regime) and stated that approximately 30% of her time was spent doing paperwork to obtain security clearances for various people and events.

Some of the women organizers we met with were concerned that if conservative Islamic fundamentalists come to power the prospect for freedom and justice for women and children could deteriorate. While Egyptian law forbids marriage of children less than 18 years old, the law is routinely ignored, especially in rural areas. Accurate statistics are difficult to find since many Egyptian marriages are not registered, but studies suggest 36% of marriages in rural communities include a bride under the age of 16 (LandCenter for Human Rights, 2010). There is a branch of Islam and Shari'a law that believes the customs and norms that applied during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (569-632) should apply today and since the Prophet had a nine year old wife then there should be no early marriage laws. According to one of the activists we met, some

conservative Islamists are campaigning to implement this ancient form of Shari'a law. The activists we met were organizing to expand the rights and power of women and children.

One woman was organizing to reform the Family Status Law (that dealt with divorce, custody, and other family legal issues), and while she was hopeful that positive change was possible, she was not very encouraged by the amount of attention this issue was getting from politicians and the press.

She stated that the Family Status Law is archaic, convoluted, and unfair to both men and women. As an example, she stated that under current law a widowed husband is 14th in line to obtain custody of his children. Visitation rules are also very restrictive and cumbersome. Since the Family Status Law is oppressive to everyone, reforming it should be self-evident, but the organizer we met with seemed frustrated by the lack of traction associated with the issue.

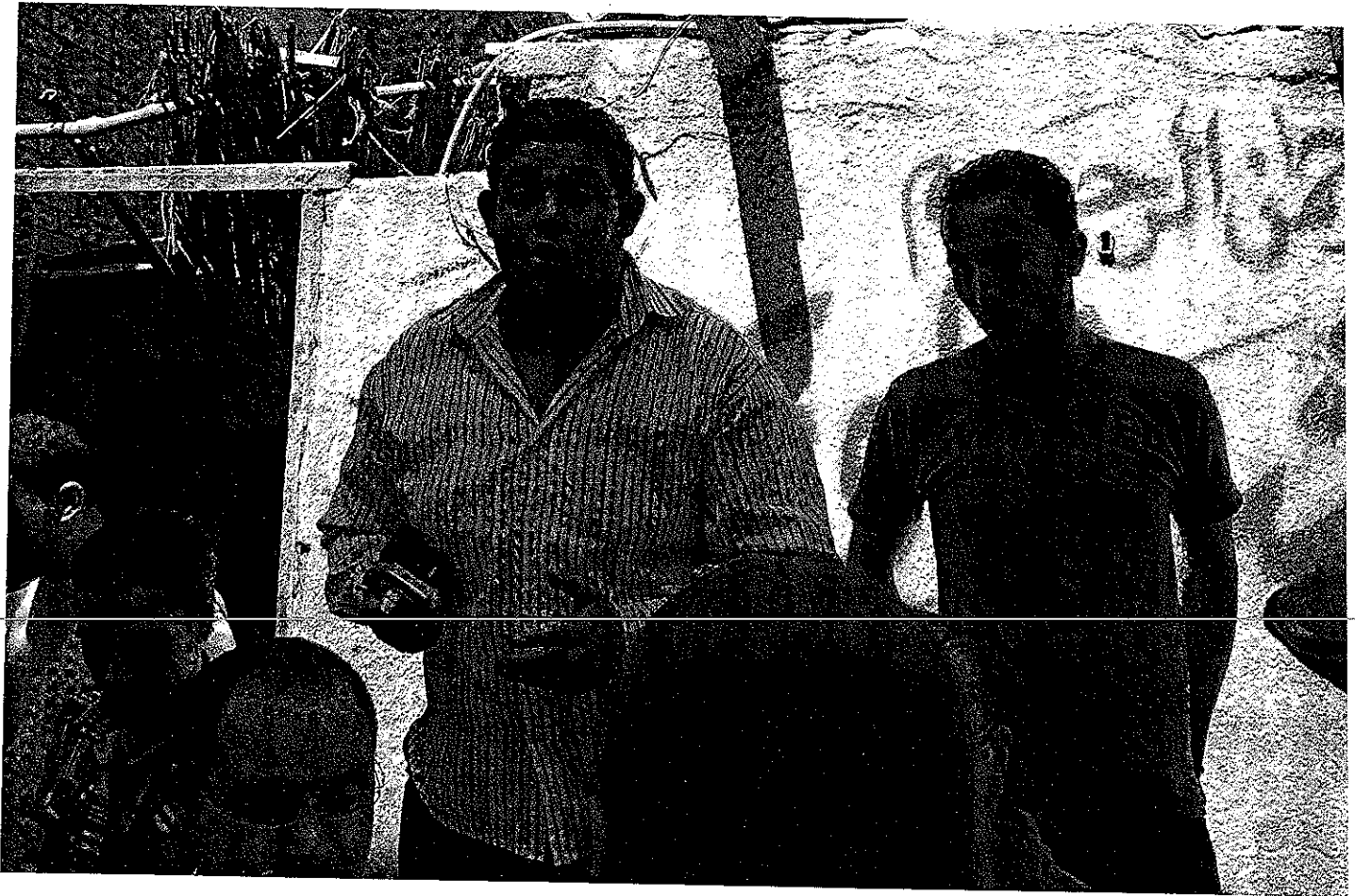
Another activist working with SOS Children's Village was organizing to have

children's rights protected in the new Egyptian constitution. While current child labor laws in Egypt conform to the International Labor Organization standards, the standards do not apply to children working for their families in agricultural areas or service work in urban areas. Estimates of street children in Egypt range from 90,000 to 1 million. Domestic violence is considered the primary cause of children leaving their families. As one activist stated, "No one is putting the rights of women and children on the political agenda." Unfortunately this pessimistic quotation seemed to sum up the current apprehension felt by organizers we met with who were concerned with the rights of women and children in Egypt.

Lagan Shaabiyya or Popular Committees

On January 28th 2011 (4 days into the uprising) Mubarak realized the police were unable to block hundreds of thousands of protestors from reaching and occupying Tahrir Square. His regime made a decision to withdraw the police completely, not only from the square but from every neighborhood in the city of Cairo. In addition, the regime reportedly withheld food from prisoners and then opened the gates of several prisons and released inmates

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to the streets with orders to terrorize the population (Bremer, 2011a). This tactic was designed to sow fear and uncertainty among the population. The regime hoped by spreading terror and chaos that the protestors would leave Tahrir Square, go home to protect their neighborhoods, and everyone would be so scared they would appeal to the government to restore order (Bremer, 2011a). None of this happened.

On January 28th and 29th in virtually every greater Cairo neighborhood (and many others all across Egypt) residents self-organized into *lagaan shaabiyya* (popular committees) which were volunteer neighborhood security patrols to stand watch and keep order in the neighborhoods. While the *lagaan* has not received a fraction of the press coverage received by the Tahrir protestors, there were many more people involved with organizing *lagaan* than there were protestors in the square. According to Bremer (2011a) every family in Cairo with an adult male was involved in their neighborhood *lagaan*. While there were some differences between neighborhood committees in composition and procedures every type of neighborhood organized a popular committee—from informal (squatters) communities (e.g., Ezbet al-Haggana)

to 500 year old working class neighborhoods (e.g., Bulaq), to recently built upper middle class suburbs (e.g., El-Rehab) (Bremer, 2011a).

The Organizers' Forum met with a middle class business woman named Rawya El Gammal who was active in organizing the *lagaan* in her upper middleclass neighborhood of Zamalek. Rawya told a spirited story about donning her ski boots and mask to equip herself for her watch shift. It was stunning to hear how heavily armed regular civilians seemed to be as Rawya described scenes of women perched on balconies throughout the night, protecting their homes and loved ones. Bremer's (2011a) study suggests that Rawya's *lagaan* participation was unique compared to popular committees in most other neighborhoods. Bremer found with the exception of one middle class neighborhood (possibly Zamalek?) women did not participate in the street level patrols in any of the other 23 popular committees in her study. Women reportedly played support roles of providing tea and food to most *lagaan* operations. So while Egyptian women were well represented on the front-lines in Tahrir Square, they were generally not involved on the streets of the *lagaan*.

The *lagaan* organizing operations were significant and worthy of further study for several reasons:

- 1) They were successful and seemed to maintain a sense of peace, calm, and order in the neighborhoods in the absence of normal state authority. This was precisely opposite the effect that the regime's strategy was trying to create. The relative calm and order in the neighborhoods helped the uprising topple Mubarak (Bremer, 2011a).
- 2) Even though collective civic action had been actively suppressed for over 30 years, the *lagaan* experience showed Egyptians could quickly and efficiently self-organize. Perhaps most notable is that these groups formed sophisticated "neighborhood watch" and communication systems so quickly without formal pre-existing structures or organizations; community organizing at this level is certainly rare. Though rare during ordinary times, the efficiency and effectiveness of this massive experiment in self-organizing offers strong empirical evidence in support of Solnit's (2009) thesis that in times of crisis and breakdown in state authority (natural disasters and revolutions), contrary to most media depictions, average people typically show a remarkable ability to behave rationally, altruistically, and even heroically. According to Solnit they often behave more rationally and humanely than the "normal authorities." This certainly seems to be the case of those participating in the Egyptian *lagaan*.
- 3) The experience was transformative and empowering to many individuals. Rawya seemed to be very empowered by participating in the *lagaan*. Bremer's findings suggest the *lagaan* experience was empowering and confidence-instilling in all types of neighborhoods except the low-income informal areas.
- 4) While most *lagaan* dissolved shortly after Mubarak was removed from power, many have remained active and are attempting to organize around community issues. The type of efficient and inclusive community organizing that took place in communities like Zamalek during the revolution demonstrates the organizational potential of close-knit neighborhoods in times of necessity or threat to the community as a whole. Certainly it is significant that organizing of the *lagaan shaabiyaa* was done internally, considering

that the establishment of trust and familiarity are time consuming but essential elements in developing effective community organizations. These nascent community organizations could play a significant role in the struggle to democratize Egypt over the next few years.

The stories of the *lagaan shaabiyaa* give us a fuller understanding of the intricacies and complexities involved in building a broad and impactful social movement. The

perseverance and thoroughness of the Egyptians involved in the development of the *lagaan* is impressive and inspiring, the implications of which will surely be felt for years to come. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore all of these aspects of the *lagaan shaabiyaa*, for further details about the formation and ongoing organizing of the *lagaan* see Bremer (2011a, 2011b).

The activities that took place in Tahrir Square over the 18 days of the revolution garnered tremendous international interest and

attention which in many ways concealed more interesting and essential activities that had to do with the organizing of it all. The great crowds of Tahrir Square, churning and swirling, displaying inspiring camaraderie and magnificent moments of passion, made great footage and excited audiences worldwide. Film cannot capture the meaning of human beings making links that create change. The groups and individuals we met in Cairo conveyed their dreams, their frustrations, their glory, and their disappointment through their incredible stories of community organizing and individual perseverance. It is possible to imagine that these efforts will be those that carry Egypt into a truly brighter future.

Thanks for additional assistance from Caroline Murray, formerly of ADP in Springfield, Rev. David Gerth of the Gamaliel Foundation, based in St. Louis, and Costanza la Mantia, an architect with a doctorate from the University of Palermo in Sicily, who were also part of our delegation.

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Film cannot capture the meaning of human beings making links that create change.

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