



PEASANTS ACTIVISM FOR LAND REFORMS

URSULA BIEMANN

Peasant activist Shahinda Maklad on her role in the 1952 Revolution, claiming land from feudal landowners for redistribution among peasants.

In the late 1970s, like many ruling regimes in poor countries governed by emergency laws and implementing World Bank directives, Egypt has created a favorable climate for large multinational corporations in the fields of production and marketing of agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, feed, vaccines, agricultural machines) to impose their conditions on local communities. Small peasants-style production was perceived as an obstacle. In the mid 80s, the US Agency for International Development (and for the advancement of foreign policy interests), in line with Mubarak's open market principles, began to promote a process of decentralization and privatization, pushing for the removal of barriers imposed by price fixing and subsidies. In 1992 the Mubarak regime finally issues a new Law which abolished the long-term security of tenant farmers and gave former landowners the right to claim back their land after five years, resulting 1997 in the eviction of over a million small farmers from their land. Ten years later, the Ministry of Agriculture further eliminated the political rights of 75% of the peasants by declaring those who own less than three acres as "non-peasants", as agricultural workers, and by renaming their status denying them access to government co-ops who only recognize legal landowners.

In president Nasser's effort to simultaneously build a giant dam and a socialist state, the central measures of imposing constraints applies to both the deadly Nile floods and the uncontrolled expansion of accumulated wealth by the feudal clans. His 1952 land reform limited land ownership, distributed the confiscated land to the peasants and granted agricultural tenants a fixed rent with a security against eviction. At the same time the reform strengthened the state and placed the majority of farmers directly under the control of the government with compulsory cropping requirements and price policies. According to peasant activist Shahenda Maklad in the Delta town Kamshish, whose husband and leader of the movement in the 70ies got killed in the conflict with the feudal landowners, the underground farmers union movement persisted during all these years where unionizing was prohibited in Egypt only to come officially to surface during the 2011 revolution.

The young generation abandoned agriculture in large numbers and attempted to migrate instead. Sidelined by neoliberal government policy affecting credit lines,

fertilizer and water supplies, small farming in the Nile Valley has become unprofitable and the young generation has migrated abroad or moved to the cities seeking day labor. The urban centers where the revolution was sparked in January 2011 were full of people from the villages who had experienced a continuous deterioration in their livelihoods. People are fighting back in their own spaces. For years, the young migrant workers have sent money to their families in the Delta. During the revolution, when the focus of the state forces was on urban upheaval, there was a wave of farmers who rushed to build houses on their farmland, an activity strictly prohibited on the precious fertile land designated for farming purposes.

Squeezed in the narrow Nile Valley, Egypt has embarked on an ambitious program of desert development to extend the cultivated surface of the country out into the desert. Large plots of land have been given to former members of the parliament or state security personnel at very reduced prices to cultivate high yield export crops. In order to make these places bloom you need a lot of water. The study of Philip Riesz shows that in many places, these large-scale agribusinesses are competing for the water that has traditionally been flowing to the villages of small farmers in the valley and the delta. The old villages at the end of the stream have to make do with what's left after large portions are pumped into new developments. It is often not enough to grow their own food. The steady increase of food export has left Egypt with ever smaller food supply for their own consumption and has continuously pushed local food prices up.

Cluster: Egyptian Chemistry: Land Reforms

Source URL: <https://www.worldofmatter.net/peasants-activism-land-reforms>