The dearth of cooperative and contentious collective action on the part of the Egyptian urban poor by no means implies a lack of grassroots activism. Conditioned by political and cultural constraints, the poor instead resort to an alternative strategy—that of quiet encroachment. Qualitatively different from defensive measures or coping mechanisms, this strategy represents a silent, protracted, pervasive advancement of ordinary people—through open-ended and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization—on the propertied and powerful in order to survive.

The proliferation of more than 100 squatter communities
with some six million inhabitants signifies only one, but
perhaps the starkest, component of the growing socioeconomic
disparity in Cairo since Sadat's infithah ("opening up" or eco-
nomic liberalization) in 1974 and the more recent
implementation of the IMF's structural adjustment program.
Between 1981 and 1991, rural poverty doubled and urban
poverty increased more than 1.5 times. By the early 1990s,
more than half of Cairo and adjacent Giza were classified
either as "poor" or "ultra-poor." Millions of Cairenes are con-
sumed by their constant search for adequate food, shelter,
jobs and the maintenance of individual and familial dignity;
most are involved in the informal economy and live in infor-
mal communities.

For some time, state safety nets, in particular populist
measures of protection, served to sustain low-income groups.
With the dawn of neo-liberalism in Egypt in the 1980s, as in
many other countries, the populist state has gradually with-
drawn its protection from the popular sectors—peasants,
workers and the urban poor. Although it is acknowledged that
the poor will suffer in the short-term, the trickle-down of na-
measures of protection, served to sustain low-income groups.
sumed by their constant search for adequate food, shelter,

By the early 1990s, poverty increased more than 1.5 times.2

devoting living spaces with relatives, purchasing low-quality food
and secondhand clothes which they may share with others
within the household, limiting health and education expenses,
and reducing daily meals to two or one.7 These practices are
as common now in Cairo as in New Delhi, Manila or Rio de

Community Activism

Beneath these coping mechanisms, there is also a strong, if
quiet, tide of resentment, resistance and reclamation. When
opportunities arise, the poor do get involved in visible collec-
tive struggle. When opportunities to engage in suitable types
of social activism are unavailable, they may create them. Inaz
Tewfiq's account (in this issue) of the prolonged struggles of
the residents of Ezbat Mekawy is one example. In this low-
income neighborhood in Cairo, residents managed, through
several years of collective campaigning, to close down local
smelter plants which had caused major health and environ-
mental problems. They used traditional strategies of
communication within the community, as well as modern tac-
tics, such as engaging the media, lobbying politicians and
accessing the court system as a means of registering opposi-
tion.

Compared to the poor in Latin American and South Asian
cities, however, such overt and organized social activism is
quite rare among Cairo's poor.8 While the lower classes in
Cairo are aware of environmental problems, they do little to
address them through collective action, either through coop-
erative communal engagement to upgrade the community
itself, or through contentious protest actions. Social networks,
which extend beyond kinship and ethnicity, remain over-
whelmingly casual, unstructured and nonpolitical. (The
gamaiyyat, the informal credit system, is perhaps the most
important form of neighborhood networking in Cairo.) The
weakness of civic or non-kinship cooperation at the commu-
nity level only reinforces traditional hierarchical, paternalistic
relations with people depending more on local elders and prob-
lem solvers than on broad-based social activism.

Why are the poor of Cairo not as mobilized as their coun-
terparts, for example, in Mexico City or Tehran? In Monterey,
Mexico, shantytown dwellers were able to stop a freight train
full of corn as families rushed out "to fill pots and sacks full of
grain." In Iran, the protests of the urban poor in the early
1990s, notably the three-day riots in the neighborhood of
Islamshahr in Tehran, constituted one of the most significant
internal political challenges to the Islamic Republic.11

One major reason for the lack of mass protest in Cairo is
the absence of structures that permit collective action in Egypt.
Sadat’s "Emergency Law" restricts contentious collective ac-
tivities. Likewise, the present electoral structure in Egypt is
not as conducive to group mobilization as it is, for example, in
India or Turkey. In a truly competitive political system, po-
itical forces are compelled to bargain with, and thus mobilize,
the poor to win their electoral support. In Egypt, this hap-

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Facts and Figures on Cairo

Despite the attention focused on the problems of cities around the world—most recently at the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul—surprisingly little comparable data on urban centers are available, as was found by the World Resources Institute in preparing their 1996-97 World Resources report. Population figures, for example, often vary depending on the definition of the urban center concerned. In the case of Cairo, estimates of its population range from a low of 9.7 million to a high of 12 million. This variation is due, in part, to the fact that Cairo can be defined at least three ways: Cairo City, metropolitan Cairo, and the Greater Cairo Region; Greater Cairo falls under at least three separate jurisdictions—Cairo, Giza, and Qalyubia—which further complicates the collection of data.

Population Density
Greater Cairo: 40,000 persons per square kilometer, up to 100,000/km² in older districts.

Rate of Growth
While Cairo City is now growing at a rate of less than two percent per year, other parts of Greater Cairo are growing at a rate of more than three percent. If growth were to continue at just the two percent rate, however, Cairo's population would double in 35 years.

Life Expectancy 65 years

Infant Mortality
35.1 per 1,000 live births (1991), Cairo City only. As in many developing countries, infant mortality rates are lower in urban than in rural areas. A comparison of data from the mid-1980s with that of other major cities placed Cairo on a par with Bombay and Istanbul.

Maternal Mortality
200 women die for every 100,000 live births (1992), Cairo City only. Egypt's overall maternal mortality rate of about 250 per 100,000 live births is in the range of such countries as Guatemala and Mexico, but roughly twice as high as the rate in such ME/NA countries as Tunisia, Iran and Syria.

Adult Literacy
69.3 percent total; 59.2 percent female (1992) Cairo City only.

Unemployment Rate
10 percent (1993), Cairo City only. Unemployment among women is estimated at 20.7 percent. Beyond the official unemployment rate, however, disguised unemployment or underemployment, is a severe problem in both the central and local government bureaucracy where the rate of disguised unemployment may exceed 30 percent.

Income
LE 2782 per capita (1992), Cairo City only. Real GDP per capita, which is based upon purchasing power, was estimated at $2,570 for 1992/93 or about half of what the UNDP considers sufficient.

Water
About 20 percent of Cairo's population, mostly in Giza and other peripheral areas, have no access to piped water and use canals, wells and public water fountains. As much as half the water available is lost due to leaks and breaks in water pipes.

Electricity
More than 95 percent of households throughout Greater Cairo have electricity.

Sewerage
Some three million people lack adequate sewerage. In the 1970s, prior to an internationally financed upgrading of some of the sewerage system, over 100 incidents of sewerage flooding occurred daily.

Telephones
510 per 1000 households (Cairo City only, 1992).

Public Safety
In a 1990 study, the murder rate in Cairo was cited as less than five per 100,000 population per year. This was on a par with most Asian cities and similar to murder rates in cities in Britain/the United Kingdom. Murder rates in such US cities as New York; Washington, DC; and Miami were between 10 and 20 per 100,000.

Compiled by Sally Ethelston

Sources
Homogeneity of inhabitants and the longevity of residence have produced a spatial identity. The coexistence of identifiable strata in a community (such as Kafr Seif where “villagers,” “newcomers,” “shanty-dwellers” and “tent-dwellers” live side by side) sharpens the existing competition and leads to conflicts. In Kafr Seif, “villagers” feared that “shanty-dwellers” and “tent-dwellers” would jeopardize their own insecure position; the latter groups remained silent so as to not be noticed by the municipality. Consequently, with solidarity being intangible among the many poor Cairenes, recourse to the state—the provider and the punisher—becomes an alternative way to achieve their goals. Many of them know, however, that the bureaucracy is unable or unwilling to respond formally to the growing demands of the urban poor. Thus, they tend to seek informal, individualistic and opportunistic ways of cultivating officials.

**Quiet Encroachment**

The dearth of cooperative and contentious collective action on the part of the Egyptian urban poor by no means implies a lack of grassroots activism. Conditioned by political and cultural constraints, the poor instead resort to an alternative strategy—that of quiet encroachment. Qualitatively different from defensive measures or coping mechanisms, this strategy represents a silent, protracted, pervasive advancement of ordinary people—through open-ended and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization—on the property and powerful in order to survive. While these types of grassroots activities are not social movements, they are also distinct from survival strategies or “everyday resistance” in that the struggles and gains of the agents are not at the cost of their fellow poor or themselves, but of the state, the rich and the powerful. In this type of struggle, the poor, to provide light for their shelter, tap electricity not from their neighbors, but from the municipality; or instead of putting their children to work to raise their living standard they demand higher pay from their employers. These struggles are not necessarily defensive, but cumulatively encroaching—the actors tend to expand their space by winning new positions from which to move. In this sense, they do not constitute “accommodating protest” since, first, they are not conscious acts of protest, but rather represent the way people live their lives. This quiet encroachment challenges many fundamental aspects of the state’s prerogatives—including the meaning of order, control of public space, the importance of modernity, and finally, the state’s encroachment on private property.

Thus, to escape from high rents, millions of rural migrants and the urban poor in Cairo have quietly claimed state/public lands and cemeteries on the outskirts of the city, creating largely autonomous communities. Greater Cairo contains more than 111 ashwa’iyat (spontaneous communities) that house over six million people who have put up their shelters...
unlawfully. Cairo is also characterized by another form of encroachment—the informal addition of rooms, balconies and extra space in and on buildings. Those who formally have been given housing in public projects built by the state, illegally redesign and rearrange their space to suit their needs by erecting partitions, and by adding and inventing new space. (See Farha Ghannam in this issue.) Often whole communities emerge as a result of intense struggles and negotiations between the poor and others in their daily lives. (See Petra Kuppinger in this issue.)

Once settled, slum dwellers try to force state authorities to extend water and electricity to their neighborhoods by tapping into them illegally. A cursory look at Cairo communities such as Dar al-Salam, Ezbat Sadat, Ezbat Khairu'llah, Ezbat Nasr and Basaatin provides evidence of this widespread phenomenon. In late April 1996, the municipality reported that it had cut off 800 illegal electricity lines in Cairo’s Dar al-Salam and Basaatin communities in one raid alone. In the domain of employment, street subsistence workers have quietly taken over public thoroughfares to conduct their business in the vast parallel economy. Well over 200,000 street vendors have occupied the streets in Cairo’s main commercial centers, encroaching on favorable business opportunities created by local shopkeepers. Many streets around major shopping areas in the neighborhoods of Muski, al-Husayn, Embaba, Sayyida Zeinab, Boulaq and Abul-Alaa have been transformed into street bazaars, through some of which vehicles can no longer venture. Informality means that not only are the agents generally free from the costs of formality (taxes, regulation and so forth), they can also benefit from the piracy of import commodities and, like many others, theft of intellectual property. With six dollars of capital, a vendor can make up to 55 dollars a month. The polarization of wealth also creates opportunities for the poor. The explosion of car ownership, for instance, has meant that middle class as well as wealthy people now depend daily on the poor to park and protect their cars in the street. Thousands of Cairo’s poor subsist on tips from parking cars in the streets, which they control and organize in such a way as to create maximum parking space. Many streets have thus turned into virtual parking lots controlled by working gangs with elaborate internal organization.

Quiet encroachment does not mean an absence of local networks, organizations or oppositional collective action. Indeed, networks are established, not only as a mechanism to ensure survival and encroachment, but also as a means to safeguard gains already won. Thus, without support from and cooperation among kin members who tend to reside in the same vicinity or work in similar occupations, the consolidation of the gains of the poor would be extremely difficult. For the popular classes of Cairo, kinship is the most significant source of solidarity. Family connections help poor households circumvent the legal/bureaucratic constraints to securing shelter, obtaining jobs and extending governmental subsidies.

While structured neighborhood meetings are rare, widespread, albeit casual, networks ensure the flow of information among community members. Although people rarely elect their local leaders, nevertheless, charismatic leaders do emerge out of seemingly inactive communities. Similarly, in the domain of work, although the spread of street vending takes place on a largely individual basis, security is ensured by spatial networks embodied in “market sheikhs.” These informal leaders, selected by their seniority, experience and skill, mediate between the vendors and the government/public. Their strategy of quiet diplomacy among the informal market sheikhs is probably more effective than the formal approaches of the official vendors’ union.

Traditional practices, solidarities and leaders thus have taken the place of and perform some of the functions of more structured neighborhood organizations found in other societies. But quiet encroachment as a type of grassroots activism has both its costs as well as its advantages. It represents a sustained, albeit silent, encroachment, that is largely unlawful and runs the constant risk of suppression. As fluid and unstructured forms of activism, these largely atomistic strategies have the advantages of flexibility and versatility; but they fall short of developing legal, technical and organizational support needed to advance the search for social justice on the broader, national level.

Endnotes on page 12.
3 These data for the urban areas of Cairo and Giza; see ibid., p. 19, table 2. In this study, the expenditure poverty line for the average urban households (of 4.6 members) was considered to be LE 3347.4 annual income, and the average rural household (with 5.2 members) was LE 3334.2. As for the urban "ultra-poor" (with 4.6 household members), the figure was LE 1933.8 and for rural areas (with 5.2 members) LE 2186.1, see ibid., p. 10.

4 This notion of urban poor draws on Peter Worsley's definition of them in his The Three Worlds, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984).

5 For analysis of the urban poor see Karayem, ibid., p. 50.


7 A compilation of these methods is available in Alyaa Shoukry, Poverty and Adaptation Mechanism: A Sociological Approach on Research in Egypt during the 80s, (Cairo: UNICEF, 1993).

8 See the research of Hopkins and Mehanna in this issue.

9 See Anthony DelPalm, "Income Gap in Mexico Grows, and So Do Protests," New York Times, July 20, 1996, p. 3. According to the same article citing United Nations and the World Bank report, "the richest 10 percent of Mexicans earn 41 percent of the country's income, while the bottom half of the population earns only 16 percent of all national income."

10 In 1991, the top 20 percent of the population earned about 50 percent of the country's income, while the bottom 40 percent earned only 13.4 percent; see Ali Akbar Karbasian, "The Process of Income Distribution in Iran," in Iran-e Pardis 17, Ordibeheste 1374/1995, p. 44 (in Farsi).


12 For instance, when in 1960, the Cairo Government began to evict the settlers of today's Mahshet Nasser from their earlier squatter community (Ebdat al-Safis, close to the Gamaliya neighborhood) deputies of the National Assembly from the district represented not the community but the government, negotiating with the local informal community leaders. See Belgin Tekce, Linda Oldham and Frederic Shorter, A Place to Live: Families and Child Care in a Cairo Neighborhood, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo, 1994), pp. 23-25.


15 Arlene MacLeod, Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993).


17 For an interesting report see Maria Tadros, "Unhomely Homes," Al-Ahram Weekly, October 17-23, 1996.

18 Abhbar Al-Maali, May 1, 1996.

19 See Emad Mekay, "Necessity is the Mother of Invention," Royo 9, Summer 1996, p. 20.


Continued from Bayat on page 6.

Endnotes

1 According to Egyptian economist Karima Korayem, the richest of urban households (the top 10 percent) which controlled about 26 percent of disposable income in 1981 had, by 1991, increased their share to 32.6 percent. See Karima Korayem, "Structural Adjustment, Stabilization Policies, and the Poor in Egypt," in Cairo Papers in Social Science 16/4 Winter 1995/6, table 4, p. 26.

2 Ibid., p. 2.

3 These data are estimated for the urban areas of the governorates of Cairo and Giza; see ibid., p. 19, table 2. In this study, the expenditure poverty line for the average urban households (of 4.6 members) was considered to be LE 3347.4 annual income, and the average rural household (with 5.2 members) was LE 3334.2. As for the urban "ultra-poor" (with 4.6 household members), the figure was LE 1933.8 and for rural areas (with 5.2 members) LE 2186.1, see ibid., p. 10.

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