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Small farmers and the revolution in Egypt: the forgotten actors
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This paper analyses the relationship between small farmers and revolution in Egypt by describing their role in the current uprising and redefining the track and stages of the revolution’s development, as well as evaluating the historical relationship between small farmer uprisings and the urban elite. The paper provides a historical reading of the peasant uprisings and the way in which the urban elites have ignored their struggles. The study confirms that revolution is not a moment but a long process socially constructed and the peasant uprising in 1997 was the first spark of a protest wave that culminated in January 2011.

Keywords: revolution in Egypt; Egyptian small farmers; agriculture in Egypt; rural sociology

Introduction
This study aims to analyse the relationship of small peasant farmers (*fellahin*), hereinafter referred to as ‘small farmers’, to the revolution in Egypt by describing their role in the current uprising and redefining the course and stages of the revolution’s development. It also evaluates the historical relationship between small farmers’ insurgency and the urban elite. Badiou (2014) suggests that the analysis of the Arab Spring was characterized by instant analysis, without a historical perspective. Moreover, the concept of ‘revolution’ has since been configured into a specific form, one embodied by the occupation of central public squares, as happened in Cairo, Istanbul, New York and Madrid. This form in turn negates other forms, not deeming them to be integral to the framework of the revolution, even though they were, during other historical periods, regarded as such.

Kabbanji (2011) points out that the prevailing intellectual models in the social sciences, in general, and especially in politics, focus their vision of the centre of action and change on the political authority and the elite, and sometimes also the middle class. As such, this undermines any opportunity to understand and analyse the social dynamics within a broader framework. This instant and urban reading of the Egyptian revolution is a barrier to reading, understanding and analysing the extent, or otherwise, of the small farmers’ role in the Egyptian revolution.

Amin (2011) describes events in Egypt as a ‘revolutionary moment’ that links the movement in the south to the liberation movements of the 1950s. Achcar (2013), in contrast, regards the Arab uprisings as the beginning of a long-term process. These two readings open the way for a freer analysis than the one limited to the moment of 2011.

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It can, therefore, be said that to understand the relationship of the small farmers to the revolution requires receptiveness to three factors: the time before and after the 18-day juncture; the observation and analysis of events beyond the capital's boundaries and its public space; and rethinking the definition of the nature of the revolution and the forms the revolutionary movement took.

Taking these factors into account, this study attempts to discuss the development of the small farmers' protest movement through an extensive reading of it, in order to give a clear picture of the reality of their insurrection and its relationship to the course and history of the nationalist movement in Egypt. In so doing, questions are put forward in this paper regarding the small farmers' participation, if any, and regarding the redefinition of the forms taken by the revolutionary movement and the possibility of relocating the small farmers' movement within the concept of the revolution within a long-term social and historical process.

1. A general overview of the countryside and agriculture

As explained by Ayeb (2010), small farmers are those who cultivate the land using their own or family labour. Here the small farmer may be an owner of the land he farms or a tenant. Ayeb’s view, with which I agree, is that any property smaller than 20 feddans\(^1\) should be considered as property of the small farmer.

According to statistics from the 2006 Census, Egypt’s rural population was 41 million, representing about 57.36% of the country’s total population, 13 million of whom worked in agriculture. In 2008, the total labour force in agriculture was around 27% of the total workforce in Egypt. Domestic agricultural production provided nearly 63% of the food needs of the population and contributed approximately 13% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009/10. Despite the importance of agriculture, however, its share of investment was decreasing at a growing rate, as shown in Table 1.

Regarding the distribution of ownership, it is clear from Table 2 that almost 90% of all landholders are small farmers who own fewer than 5 feddans, while around 9% own fewer than 20 feddans. One per cent own more than 20 feddans, but at the same time they own 24.9% of the cultivated area.

The statistics and field observations reveal that the small farmers are not a single block with a congruent base and interests. Similarly, the various changes seen by the agricultural sector led to an increasing diversification of income sources. The agricultural sector for small farmers has experienced a severe decline and deliberate neglect by the state, as well as a reduction in its role in the livelihoods of many small farmers. Abu Kurayshah (1998) refers to the fact that approximately 80% of small farmers work in other jobs outside the agricultural sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage investment in the agricultural sector</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The Egyptian countryside during the Mubarak era

Since 1952, economic policies in Egypt have passed through at least three major stages: the first stage was characterized by state reliance on centralization and the domestic economy; the second stage focused on ‘limited’ economic openness; and the third stage focused on economic consolidation and structural adjustment (Ramsis Farah 2009).

During the first years of the Nasser period (1952–57), rates of social equality increased and severe rural poverty fell as a result of the agrarian reform laws. However, the gains achieved by small farmers began to diminish due to Anwar Sadat’s and Hosni Mubarak’s policies against them. For example, in 1974 Sadat issued Law 69 to remove state control over arable lands which, under Nasser, the Ministry of Agrarian Reform had sequestered from the landlords, and handed over to the small farmers to farm though tenancy agreements. Law 69 led to hundreds of small farmers losing the lands they had been cultivating. In the Mubarak era a series of measures were adopted which led to the elimination of the gains made by the small farmers during the Nasser period. This included the abolition of the state subsidy for agricultural fertilizers, the liberalization of markets for seeds and pesticides, as well as the privatization of state-owned companies dealing in arable land. The outcome of these measures was a change in the tenancy relationship between the landowner and the tenant and became known as Law 96 of 1992.

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Table 2. Percentage of landholdings of agricultural land between 1981 and 2000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size class of landholdings in feddans</th>
<th>Number of total landholders</th>
<th>Percentage area of total agricultural land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–20</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kishk (2013).

In 1992, the Egyptian parliament agreed on the law entitled ‘Reform of the tenancy relationship between owner and tenant’. That law contained an increase in the value of rent from seven times the tax applied to agricultural lands to 22 times the land tax during the transitional period of five years. Following that period, it would be left up to the market to determine the value of the rent. Law 96 of 1992 was decisive in ending the most significant gains made by the small farmers from Nasser’s agrarian reform laws. These had included tenancy security and the registration of the tenant and partner as the ‘holder of the land’, making him the same as the landowner. This was added to a package of rights associated with the landholding, such as voting in the assembly, obtaining low-priced seeds and pesticides, and loans from the Credit or Agricultural Development and Credit Bank.

Law 96 caused the dispossession of around 904,000 tenants. This meant that out of 5 million Egyptian families, 431,000 families in total were harmed because of the law. One thousand families – an average of 46% – also lost their income (Sabir 2001). Saad (2002) quotes Ismail Abdel Mawla as saying that the tenants affected by the law had been farming approximately 23.7% of the arable land in Egypt. That had led to the huge rise in agricultural rents, as shown in Table 3.
Although the state aimed to apply the law of ‘consolidation of property’ and reduce the small holdings in order to develop the sector through mechanization, the law led to an increase in the fragmentation of arable land, according to statistics for the agricultural census. The percentage of landholders with less than one feddan was 36% of all landholders in 1990 and became 43% in 2000 (Hassanayn 2010).

For the countryside, as a social and geographical space, and for small farmers’ agriculture as an economic activity, the crises surrounding them worsened. Several, often contradictory, signs of this became apparent. For example, subsistence farming had recovered some of its momentum while child labourers appeared in commercial farms on the boundaries of Cairo, or in the deserts on the edges of the Nile Valley. Moreover, violence grew – specifically of a sectarian and tribal violence – against the state. Illegal immigration spread to Arab countries (Libya) or Europe. Similarly, short-term immigration for three months to Libya and tourist cities (local and international migration) came to be a factor in the complex livelihoods of the poor in the countryside.

### 3. The question of the extent of small farmers’ participation in the revolution

This paper sets the premise that the present Egyptian revolution passed through four main stages before it culminated in the context of January 2011. The first stage was the small farmers’ uprising of 1997–2000. This was followed by the second stage: the unrest that the residents of random districts engaged in from 2000 to 2007. This was followed by the third stage, lasting from 2004 to 2011: that of the ‘Kefaya’ (Enough) movement and the events that followed it, which had the heart of the cities as their main theatre. The fourth stage came after January 2011 and remains open and inconclusive. The next sections will focus on the uprising in the rural areas and the forms the small farmers’ movement took before, during and after January 2011 in order to connect these to the key issue of this study.

#### Small farmers rising up alone (1996–2013)

The small farmers’ uprising against the application of the 1997 owner and tenant law represented a crucial turning point in the relationship of citizens to the state during the Mubarak era. This protest movement took place in the midst of an atmosphere charged by a ‘national burden’ framed within the ‘the war on takfiri (extremist) groups’. The period from 1990 to 1997 witnessed a violent struggle between the

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Table 3. Development of the rental value for agricultural lands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legal framework</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Value (Egyptian pounds) per feddan/year</th>
<th>Method for fixing the rental value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law 178 (1952)</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>7 times land tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007–08</td>
<td>5000–5500</td>
<td>Market value</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

state and these groups. In 1990, the Islamic Jihad Group assassinated Rifaat el-Mahgoub, speaker of the People’s Assembly. Acts of destruction continued, as well as the targeting of public figures, the Christian minority and foreign tourism up to the incident in Luxor in 1997 when 62 tourists were killed. The Mubarak regime exploited this period to repress all uprisings and to silence all voices under the slogan of ‘no voice is louder than the voice of the battle’. However, in 1993, the regime itself began to open channels with the organizations until an agreement to stop the violence was reached between al-Jama’a al-Islamiya (The Islamic Group) and the government in 1998. One of the main outcomes of this period was to strengthen the control the police apparatus had over the regions and its security grip over villages, preventing or curbing any political activity. The intelligentsia and the opposition were also subdued and rallied under the banner of the state. During this time, and under the cover of national consensus, ‘neoliberal’ policies for economic consolidation and structural adaption were pushed through. Yet the state did not connect the growth of the takfir groups in the governorates of Faiyum, Minya and Asyut – among the poorest rural areas – to their agricultural policies.

Between October 1997 and May 1998, the Land Centre for Human Rights documented violent clashes in more than 100 villages and recorded 32 deaths, in addition to injuries to 751 small farmers and the arrest of 2410 small farmers in the Egyptian countryside, resulting from protests and confrontations with the police and landowners due to the implementation of that law. Most of the farmers had faced intimidation, illegal detention and torture by the police forces.4

Despite the authorities’ success in suppressing the small farmers’ uprising, the demonstrations of rural violence towards the state increased. One of the significant events worth mentioning was the village of Nama’s confrontation with the state. After a village child was killed by a car passing by on the highway, the people decided to close the road and prevent traffic from using it, in defiance of the state. Ramadan, in an article published by al-Ahram newspaper on 18 March 2000, says, ‘We must stop a while to analyse the revolt by the people of the village of Mit Nama.’ According to the examination undertaken by members of the prosecution who travelled to the place of the revolt, the people cut off the road using concrete barriers and tree branches. They damaged 13 cars, including one belonging to the police and another to the fire department, in addition to a public transport bus and a lorry. There were also bodily injuries. Eight private and hired cars were smashed, including a private car belonging to al-Ahram. More than 300 people participated in the revolt. Ramadan saw this event as being an indicator of the ‘rural revolution’.

The majority of political powers had lined up to apply the law and united with the state against the small farmers, either publicly, such as the position of the Muslim Brotherhood who supported the law,5 or the left who did not support the small farmers. Shahenda Maqlad,6 leader of the small farmers, stated, ‘The Tajammu Party has abandoned us.’7 The Nasserist Party, a marginal party at that time, sided with the small farmers, together with the Land Centre and some lawyers and academics. However, it is impossible to ignore the relationship between the central elite’s hostility to the small farmers’ movement, the case of the national burden and the lining up behind Mubarak to confront the takfir groups.8

Although most of the urban elite ignored the small farmers’ uprising, it was, nevertheless, able to break the state of national consensus around confronting terrorism and end the silence around the government’s neoliberal policies. It also punched a hole in the state-built wall of fear of the police. For that reason, it was followed by successive
waves of protests by the marginalized in the city and protests by workers and employ-
ees, and later protests in the centre of the city until January 2011.

January 2011: was it ‘a revolution in the heart of the city’ or ‘a revolution of the heart of the city’?

To answer this question, we must break down the 18-day period as the basis on which the urban image of the Egyptian revolution was created. It is true that 25 January 2011 specifically was a distinctly urban day, expressing the demand of the rights movement to stop internal torture practices, and formed essentially of youth from the urban middle class from various spectra. The number of demonstrators that day was around 40,000.9

Over the course of the following days, however, the number reached a few million, and the ‘urban’ character of events was altered by the participation of the provinces. This greatly influenced the course of events. The occupation of Tahrir Square included individuals from the rural governorates who were desperate after the closing of the roads prevented them from returning home. Many of them joined in the activities to protect and secure the square.10

The biggest marches also came from the more rural districts in Giza and Qalubiya bordering Cairo, especially on 28 January. These observations raise questions not only about the political but also about the geographical affiliations of these rural groups who gathered in the urban squares. This question was not posed, even by the locals or the leaders of the social movement themselves. The dominant question was, and still is, who was leading these groups? Therefore, studies have only focused, on the organized urban youth groups and movements of 25 January.

After January 2011

Although agricultural policies were unchanged on the eve of Mubarak’s departure, his exit, nevertheless, represented a symbolic capital for the small farmers. They had felt that the opportunity to recover their rights had come. This feeling translated into four main forms of movement and action. The first was a movement organized between members of a union of small farmers. The second was demonstration and occupation. The third was direct action for the use of land and habitation. The fourth and final form was the constitutionalization of rights. None of these four forms was organized or successive, nor did they happen in a coordinated manner, but they intersected in varying ways across about 4673 Egyptian villages. Each of these forms will be dealt with in more detail below.

As indicated in Table 4, four rural organizations were established after the fall of Mubarak. Initially, the Egyptian Federation of Small Farmers was able to attract 1000 small farmers, and the number of members reached more than 70,000. However, the organizational support obtained by the General Union of Small Farmers from the Ministry of Agriculture raised their number of members to 500,000, while the first union remained within 100,000, as shown in Table 4. Likewise, the Muslim Brotherhood movement attempted to rally the farmers affiliated to it so that they would not join another alliance with different orientations. They hurried to establish a union, attracting a considerable cross-section in the countryside.

The figures for the number of members in the unions and associations, which we have shown, clarify that the total number of small farmers who joined one of those
independent unions was almost 700,000. The competition between the various political powers to organize the small farmers in their ranks took on powerful forms after the fall of Mubarak. The first form the small farmers’ movement took was through the organizing and formation of its membership into a trade union. However, given the complicated picture of the unions illustrated in Table 4, it would be implausible to conclude that the membership of the small farmers represented a homogenous radical union movement, as mentioned by Saker (2013). Yet the main issue with regard to most of the farmers’ unions is that they were formed by the establishment of a higher central trade union, without building a union held together at the basic level of villages and small communities. This is viewed as a leap beyond the reality of the social movement.

Table 5. Causes and number of small farmer protests in 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ownership of agricultural land</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of fertilizers</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of irrigation water</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other causes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Land Centre for Human Rights, Cairo (see http://www.lchr-eg.org/).
The second form taken by the small farmers’ movement was their participation in the protest movement after they had renewed their old demands. The small farmers called for agrarian reform with the return of their lands (Kempf 2011). The rice farmers wanted extra shares of water. Those affected by Law 96 of 1992 also demanded the return of the lands which they had been renting.

A report issued by the Land Centre for Human Rights in 2012 states that the small farmers carried out 158 protests, with 74 sit-ins and 84 demonstrations. Table 5 shows that 95% of the demands of the small farmers protesting were mostly related to a shortage of resources, the greatest of which were land, water and fertilizers.

The third form of the farmers’ movement was direct action for recovering the shortfall in resources. Karam Saber, Director of the Land Centre for Human Rights, mentions the fact that incidents and clashes had taken place to reclaim lands in over 50 villages where the small farmers were able to seize the land in order to farm it (Davies 2013, 26). Moreover, another form of direct action was to build on agricultural land against the laws preventing building on such land, since there are no plans to solve the housing problem in rural areas. al-Ahram newspaper reported on the cabinet’s statement that over the past three years around 1.2 million cases of building on agricultural land had been counted, resulting in a ‘loss’ of around 47,000 feddans.11 If the fact is considered that a feddan is equal to 4200 m², and that all the violations were equal in area, then each violation represented building on 129 m². This is a very limited area and demonstrates the extent of the need to build homes in the countryside.

The fourth and final form was food sovereignty, which was assured in the 2014 constitution thanks to pressure from the small farmers’ unions, civil society organizations and some academics working in the fields of environment and rights. Article 79 of the 2014 constitution stipulates:

> Every citizen has the right to healthy and adequate nutrition and clean water. The state must guarantee nutritional resources for all citizens, also provide sustainable food sovereignty, preserve agricultural biological diversity and types of local plants, in order to protect the rights of future generations.

Evidently, this constitutional text needs to be transformed into a package of laws and policies. It does, however, express the constitutionalization of a fundamental right that would not have been possible without the existence of a growing movement of small farmers trying to impose itself in the political and social arenas.

Overall, it can be said that the actions of the small farmers that followed January 2011 combined something in between organization and impromptu direct action which Ashmawi (2001, 28) describes as ‘spontaneous social movement’, while Bayat (2013, 4) calls them ‘social non-movements’. Bayat defines social non-movements as ‘the collective action of dispersed and unorganised actors’. The activists’ interest in ‘social non-movements’ is directed towards improving opportunities in their lives. Usually, social non-movements lack ideological leadership and organizational structure; neither do they have a goal to overthrow the existing system. In Bayat’s opinion, the Arab uprisings did not nullify the non-movement; rather the non-movements always keep their activists in a state of constant mobilization. This implies that whenever the activists of the social non-movement feel that there is an opportunity, it is likely that they will carry out organized group protests, or merge into a broader social and political mobilization; this was observed with the small farmers.
4. The historical relationship between the small farmers’ uprisings and the nationalist movement

The relationship between the small farmers’ insurgencies and the national movement is not new, but is as old as the struggle for authority and resources in Egypt. This study attempts to break down this complicated historical relationship and discuss the hypothesis of an historical connection between the small farmers’ uprising and the public popular uprising, and how this scene has been repeated time and time again throughout history. The study also touches on the nature of the relationship between the urban elite and rural demands by looking at the 1919 revolt and the Free Officers Movement in 1952.

The small farmers were first to revolt

From a historical reading of popular uprisings in Egypt during the past century, one of the striking observations is that the small farmers’ movement often coincided with the nationalist movement at certain points, or the small farmers’ uprisings preceded the bourgeois nationalist movement by one or more steps. Two important events – the 1919 revolt and the July 1952 movement – are worthy of mention.

From the beginning of March to the end of April 1919, Egypt experienced one of the greatest revolts of the 20th century. The events had begun when the leadership of the nationalist movement was arrested on 9 March 1919 and exiled abroad. According to Goldberg’s (1992) ranking, this revolt is considered one of the biggest small farmers’ revolts in recent times in the southern region.

The small farmers’ uprising was not only against the British occupation but also against the group of big landowners, such that some of the pashas feared that the revolt against the English occupation would turn into a revolt against them. During this uprising, the small farmers attacked the palaces of the pashas, taking produce and supplies from them, and refusing to pay their exorbitant rents. The small farmers’ movement was powerful in all the regions of Egypt until British forces resorted to increasing violence in order to restrain it. Hijazi (2005), quoting Abdel-Malek (1971), comments that the farmers were able to take possession of pieces of land. Under the leadership of the lawyers and intelligentsia, they set up petty states and republics, as in al-Mina and Zafti, but these did not last long. There were two aspects to the small farmers’ uprising: on the one hand, it supported both national liberation from colonialism, and on the other hand, improved economic and social conditions. That was at variance with the leadership of the Wafd Party and the bourgeois leaders of the 1919 revolt. As Hijazi (2005) shows, according to Egyptian historians and British documents, were it not for the small farmers’ participation, the revolt would not have taken place.

The Free Officers Movement of 1952 was preceded by a long movement lasting from 1944 to 1951. In 1945, the landowners raised the agricultural rents using the increase in yield as a pretext. The small farmers complained and a wave of protests began in dispersed areas. The protest movements were spontaneous, triggered by increasing pressure of the agricultural rents and the severity and arbitrariness of the administration. The protests meant shocks for the regime. The rate of agricultural rents had increased over 14 years – between 1936 and 1950 – by an average of 472%. For example, in 1951 the farmers of Aja went on strike from picking cotton in protest at the increase in agricultural rents. The farmers of Bahut and Kufur Najm
declined to settle their debts with the landowners. Some of the farmers of Kamshish al-
Minufiyah refused forced labour, and in Giza forces besieged the city of Nahiya in the
centre of Imbaba. In the summer of 1951, the protest movements took place in the coun-
tryside recorded an increase, as the countryside witnessed 49 strikes, also violent con-
frontations between the small farmers and the landlords, most prominently in Bahut,
Sinara, Kufur Najm and Zanin in Giza, Mit Fadala in Aja, al-Sirw and Fariskur al-
Daqahliya.

On 23 September 1951, Ahmad Husayn wrote an article in al-Ishtirakiyya, the
newspaper of the Young Egypt (Misr el-fatah) Party, entitled ‘Revolution, Revolution,
Revolution’. In it he warned of the outbreak of a revolt by the farmers and the unem-
ployed, resulting from the deteriorating conditions and by the small farmers’ strikes
(Husayn 1952). Berque (1967) explains the 1951 uprising of small farmers as being
due to meagre wages and heavy taxes. Thus, the small farmers’ protest took on an
aggressive form, unprecedented in its nature and reach. Khalid (1974) described the
agricultural rents at the start of the 1950s as ‘death contracts’. The small farmers’ upris-
ings represented one of the deepest roots of the nationalist movement, but how did this
movement deal with the demands of the countryside?

The relationship between the Egyptian bourgeoisie and Egyptian farmers
The disregard that the small farmers’ uprising faced in 1997 was not new. In his Pages
from the History of Egypt (1989), Yahya Haqqi says that when the small farmers came
out in the revolt in 1919 calling for independence and freedom, they would shout:

We are here. You have long forgotten us, a forgetfulness that is like contempt. Let us all
raise our hands together to be the arbiter of rule for the people, not for the desire of rule,
but for justice to achieve social solidarity. (Haqqi 1989, 216)

Abd al-Malik in his commentary on the causes of the failure of the 1919 revolt points to
the fact that the Wafd Party had not been aiming for a change to the existing social
structure or a revolution against the upper bourgeoisie and the biggest landlords. There-
fore, the adoption of agrarian reforms was not mentioned (Hijazi 2005).

In contrast to the 1919 revolt, the Free Officers Movement of 1952 had wanted to
change the social structure and destroy the power of the top bourgeoisie and the land-
owners. Despite the high importance of the agricultural land rent reform and tenant
security, the process of redistribution that accompanied the agrarian reform laws was
not as great as thought at the time. The serious study by Abd al-Fadil (1978, 21) con-
firms that the total amount of land distributed was very small. Abd al-Fadil refers to the
fact that within the framework of the agrarian reform laws around 15% of all the farmland
was redistributed and approximately 9% of the population benefitted from the
process of redistribution. Despite the July Movement’s partial bias towards the
farmers, the July regime began, nonetheless, to withdraw gradually and form a new
generation urban bourgeoisie, thereby neglecting the countryside and ruining the
small farmers’ movement.

However, it was not the ruling Egyptian authority alone that had been ignoring the
small farmers, their movement and demands, but also the urban opposition. Their
relationship with the countryside took on various forms, one manifestation of which
is described by Le Blanc (2009) who terms the phenomenon as ‘social invisibility’.
This has three aspects, the first of which is ‘dependence’. This implies that a group
of individuals submit to the decisions and actions of a supreme authority. Whatever that authority approves, refuses or decides, the individuals must approve, refuse or decide likewise, without question. In all cases, it is the authority who has absolute power of decision. Individuals do not ‘choose’; in such a case they simply ‘believe’ that it is right and proper and do not question this fact. The second aspect is ‘marginalization’, which means that the ‘other person’ is on the margin of the picture, meaning he/she is inside the framework but at its edge, there only to complete the picture. He/she has no voice and though he/she might have the right to express an opinion, his/her opinion it is not necessarily taken into account. The third aspect is to be ‘invisible’, meaning the ‘other person’ is totally ignored and treated as if he were unseen; the person is ‘invisible’.

Conclusions: the contribution of small farmers to the events of January 2011

This study has attempted to present a wider historical reading of the small farmers’ relationship to the revolution, with a focus on the revolution’s present juncture. It has explained the interconnected relationship between the small farmers’ movements and the changes in Egypt at large. Thus, it cannot be ignored that the farmers’ uprisings were foreshadowed by three major historical events and the relationship between the uprisings and the events is not separate from the general substance; hence, the social and economic crisis that preceded the three major events is the first essential feature that links them together. The second essential feature is that signs of the emerging crisis were more visible in the rural areas due to the decades-long marginalization that rural Egypt has suffered and continues to suffer. To the present day, the phenomenon of poverty is spreading further throughout the Egyptian rural landscape. We have mentioned the depth of the economic crisis and the effects of the food crises that preceded the 1919 revolt, likewise the taxation and agricultural rent crisis prior to 1952, and finally the rent crisis and the expulsion of tenants in 1997. The food crisis and the shortage of resources, particularly for land and taxes, were primary motives for the small farmer uprisings throughout history.

Eric Wolf writes: ‘[Everywhere, this historical experience bears …] engrams of events not easily erased and often only latent in the cultural memory until some greater event serves to draw them forth again’ (Wolf 1969, 276). The small farmers’ uprising of 1997 represented the first support to dismantling the barrier built by the state through the mutual understanding of the fight against terrorism as a guise for carrying through the state’s neoliberal policies and political changes. Wolf views peasant rebellions as not merely a response to local problems but as local reactions to the major dislocations arising from the upheaval in society itself. He asserts that the market system that tears people away from their roots and breaks off social relationships between them is the very thing that leads to this peasant unrest. It is the use of the countryside as a factory to test out economic liberalization policies that led to the rural uprising. Consequently, when the major cities came out on 25 January, the regime had no supporters in the rural areas standing by it to prevent the limited urban uprising from changing into a larger popular uprising. Therefore, the change that occurred is not only tied to the small farmers’ uprisings, but also they are not necessarily the unique and direct cause of the popular uprisings seen in Egypt. They represent, however, a central element in the series of events and experiences that changed the nature of the relationships between the citizens and the state and their way of handling political, social and economic failures.
Our enquiry into the course of the small farmers’ protests and their development highlights their participation in January 2011. In addition, after January 2011 the activity of the spontaneous movements was separate from the social movements in the form of direct actions provoked by the shortage of resources. While many of the small farmers merged into the social movement, they also established unions and organizations and coordinated with political parties and other social movements.

The view of the revolution as an insurrection of the city of Cairo or a flash uprising isolated from its roots was not the result of pure random chance, but was instead the product of a process of social pressure ultimately aimed at limiting the course the revolution was taking. Excluding the small farmers may, therefore, be considered as an attempt to restrict the course of the revolution to democratic change alone, so that radical change would not alter the structure of the economy or bring about social and geographical justice between the between rural and urban areas.

Notes
1. A feddan is a unit of area equal to 4200 m².
2. Kefaya (kifaya), the Egyptian Movement for Change, is a loose group of various Egyptian political powers whose aim is to establish new legislation in Egypt. It was set up after the Egyptian Cabinet change in July 2004 when 300 Egyptian intellectuals and public personalities drafted a founding document demanding real political change in Egypt. Membership in the movement was personal and not representative.
3. Takfiri signifies intolerance to infidelity in Islam, as interpreted by extreme radical Islamic groups including Daish and Al-Nusra. Such groups physically eliminate anyone who opposes their doctrine or interpretation of Islam.
5. ‘Abd al-Halim (2004) confirms that the Brotherhood movement wanted to distribute the lands seized by the agrarian reform law to the wealthy farmers and not to the poor. This was because the wealthy had the ability to maintain the land. After the fall of Mubarak, the small farmers’ unions proposed the annulment of the law but the spokesman for the Economic Committee of the Party for Freedom and Justice, Mahmud Jawdah, affirmed the group’s refusal to change the law or annul it saying, ‘It is unacceptable, intellectually or legally, for the tenant to share ownership of the land with its owner.’
7. Tagammu (al-Tajammu’ – The National Progressive Unionist Party) is one of the most prominent Egyptian leftist parties. It was set up in 1976 with the re-establishment of political parties.
8. From a public lecture by the Director Yousry Nasrullah, where he said, ‘The Mubarak regime made the intelligentsia choose between it and between terrorism, so they chose Mubarak.’
9. In a televised interview on 26 January 2011 with one of the members of the Socialist Revolutionary Movement, he said: ‘What is happening is historic. Our numbers have reached 40,000 for the first time in the history of our demonstrations. It really is revolution.’
10. During the 18 days, the occupiers’ tents bore either the names of the organizations to which the occupiers belonged or the governorates from which they had come. There were separate tents for Aswan, Minufiyah, Sohag and other rural governorates.
11. For additional detailed reading on this issue, see Ahram Online (2014).
12. For a detailed reading on this issue, see El Nour (2013) and Sabry (2009).

References


