



Why the battle for control of downtown Cairo is a fight for the future of Egypt

Three years after the revolution, the state is trying to cleanse central Cairo - clashing with street-sellers, revolutionaries, politicians, property investors and artists

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Patrick Kingsley and Marie-Jeanne Berger in Cairo

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On the streets of downtown Cairo a squadron of armoured personnel carriers and kalashnikov-toting policemen have stood guard for much of the past few months. In itself, this isn't new - Egypt's security forces have often fought protesters in these streets during the past four years. But this time their target is different: they're here to keep downtown Cairo free from street-vendors - men selling T-shirts and pants emblazoned with Spongebob Squarepants. "We will not allow one vendor to busy the street," Cairo's governor, Galal Saeed, warned at the start of the crackdown.

For the sellers, the policy is a small catastrophe. After the 2011 uprising, the police vanished from the downtown area, and hundreds of stallholders took advantage of the security vacuum to set up shop in the heart of Cairo, clogging several of its main streets. But now the state is finally making its presence felt once again, and the sellers have been shunted en masse to the Turgoman car park, in the shadow of Cairo's main bus station. Footfall is almost zero here, and the vendors' revenues have fallen to a similar level.

And they are furious. “The government is using us to make it look like they’re working on downtown,” says Ahmed Abdelgalil, a 29-year-old shirt-seller sitting in the empty Turgoman car park. “But in reality they’re not doing anything. They’re just improving their image at our expense.”

By prime minister Ibrahim Mahleb’s own admission, the cleansing of downtown Cairo is emblematic of the state’s attempts to restore its own authority – or, as Mahleb himself puts it, “state prestige”. Three years after the revolution loosened the state’s control over many parts of Egypt – not least in central Cairo, home of the famous Tahrir Square – the state is back, and wants people to know it.

But in central Cairo the state has competition. Its scrap with the street-sellers is the most visible powerplay in a battle for the soul of the downtown area – but it is just one of several such tussles. Revolutionaries, politicians, property investors and artists are among a clutch of actors to articulate competing and overlapping narratives on what Cairenes call “wust el-balad”: the centre of the country.



Ramy Ramadan, a street seller at Turgoman car park, where footfall – and revenues – are almost zero. Photograph: Patrick Kingsley

“Now downtown is almost at a juncture,” says Omar Nagati, an architect who works in downtown Cairo, where he co-founded urban design and research platform Cluster. “Are we going back to business as usual? Or has what happened in the last three or four years created a new condition that allows more space for negotiation?”

Since 2011, the people most associated with the area have been the revolutionaries. Young, secular activists, they turned a previously tightly policed area into a symbol of people-power, filling its streets with weekly protests, its once-barren walls with beautiful murals, and its cafes with political debate.

“After the revolution I’d go every day to share political views,” says Ahmad Abd Allah, a leading member of the now-banned 6 April movement, one of the groups that helped spark the uprising. “Sitting in downtown united a lot of people – it became a hub for the youth groups.”

In fact, the state’s plan to revamp the area was quite literally halted by the revolution. “We were supposed to sign the contract on 1 February [2011],” remembers Sahar Attiya, the urban planner who won the government tender to beautify the area – part of a wider, controversial Mubarak-era plan, known as Cairo 2050, to redevelop the capital. “But the revolution started on 25 January. So everything stopped.”

Until the rise of Egypt’s new strongman, former army chief Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, the state’s attitude to a highly politicised downtown area largely became one of containment. The

government blocked off several streets with walls that prevented protesters from reaching key state institutions.

Even now, Attiya's blueprint to restructure the area has not yet been revisited. The various governmental departments that have agency in downtown Cairo - the local governor, the national leadership, and the state-run company that owns 400 buildings in the area - do not act as one.

But since Sisi ousted Egypt's first post-revolution president, Mohamed Morsi, the state has begun a comeback. Some of the walls have been knocked down. Police have returned. Protest has effectively been banned. Major buildings have been repainted - and the revolutionaries have been squeezed out along with the street-sellers.

"Getting the street-sellers off the street is just a smokescreen for getting us all off the streets," says Ahmad Abd Allah, who now has to hold fort in a cafe far from the bustle of the downtown area. "A lot of activists have been detained from downtown cafes, so it's not a safe space. It used to be a gathering point for all of us. Now we've been scattered."

Attiya, though, is not distraught by this. "I don't want people to feel that public spaces are only for demonstration," she says. "I want it to be for other culture - for activity that's not necessarily political."

Cairo's modern-day downtown pains those who want it to return to its belle-epoque hey-day in the first half of the 20th century. Back then, its grand European-style boulevards were home to much of the city's elite, as well as a large expatriate community, and were lined with ornate cafes, cinemas and expensive shops.



Sohair Kamel's apartment in downtown Cairo. Photograph: Marie-Jeanne Berger

Over the past 50 years, downtown Cairo has fallen into decay. Its art-nouveau apartment blocks are now caked in dirt. After the government embarked on a nationalisation programme in the 1950s, and as Cairo expanded in the 60s, 70s and 80s, most of the area's richer residents were either forced out or chose to move to newer urban hubs.

"Life on this street has changed completely since I first came here," says 69-year-old Soheir Kamel, who has lived in a grand flat in downtown Cairo for nearly a half-century, but now finds herself the only resident in her building. "You don't feel safe here. My daughter used to come home very late - one in the morning even! Now, never."

A combination of rent-control laws and rapid inflation meant that many of the remaining residents ended up paying little more than a few pounds a month in rent - which gave landlords little incentive to keep their property well-maintained. So by the 90s, many buildings had fallen into disrepair, and the downtown area had turned downmarket.

“It has always been a place where dramatic shifts have been happening,” says Kareem Ibrahim, co-founder of Takween, a group of community-focused urban planners in Cairo. “You can’t say that there is an indigenous population that has [always] been living in downtown. It was a place for the elite of society, and then a middle-class place, and then even a lower-middle class place.”

One private company is slowly attempting to reverse this change. Over the past few years, a group of private investors called Ismaelia has bought at least 24 buildings in downtown Cairo - a sizeable investment that has put the company under considerable scrutiny. Ismaelia’s professed aim is to restore the area to its former splendour. It is renovating its own buildings, and encouraging artists to use them, often at favourable rates - and it helped found an annual arts festival named after the neighbourhood: the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-caf). In the process, it hopes the area will regain its commercial value so the properties can be sold on for profit.

Ismaelia’s aims broadly align with the government’s: both want the area sanitised. But Ismaelia’s strategy - that of co-opting Cairo’s creatives - highlights the complexity of its role. One of Ismaelia’s prized tenants was Bassem Youssef, a widely watched satirist notorious for his criticism of the government. Meanwhile, the artistic networks Ismaelia deals with often overlap with revolutionary ones; the stand-out piece from D-caf 2013 was created by a leading anti-regime graffiti artist.

Ismaelia’s competing alliances - coupled with its commercial aims, and its position as the only big private investor in downtown Cairo - mean the company is viewed with suspicion even by the galleries and artists it theoretically supports. While Ismaelia claims it is saving the area, others say its goal is gentrification.



Rana ElNemr, the co-founder of the Contemporary Image Collective, which holds art exhibits in a space owned by Ismaelia.
Photograph: Marie-Jeanne Berger

But the idea that Ismaelia “wants to push people out” of downtown Cairo, responds Ismaelia’s CEO, Karim Shafei, ignores how “people are already pushed out”. By his estimates, 40% of the properties he bought there were already empty - due to the exodus in the 80s - making the area “a ghost-town that has been abandoned by its residents”. “[It] is degenerating and has been for 40 years. The buildings are a mess. We are saving these buildings and turning them into a commercially viable alternative - and I think that’s the only way to save them.”

Shafei is generally considered to be a positive influence on the area. But for Hajer Awatta, a researcher writing a thesis on downtown Cairo, this misses the point. “Ismaelia can do anything they want,” says Awatta. “Out of the enlightenment of their CEO, things don’t seem bad. But what happens if he leaves? What if investors turn on him? There’s nothing regulating them or any other investor.”

Artists suspect they will eventually be squeezed out once the area turns upmarket. “Maybe in this situation we would lose the privilege of the space,” says Rana ElNemr, the co-founder of the Contemporary Image Collective, a non-profit that holds art exhibits in a space owned by Ismaelia.

They also fear for the area’s working class - the mechanics and craftsmen who settled in there over the past half-century, and who are now just as much a part of the neighbourhood as anyone. For some creatives and revolutionaries, there is even some fleeting sympathy for the street-sellers who flooded the area following the revolution. Even if the vendors ultimately became an intimidating presence, particularly for women, their anarchic persona was a reminder, at least for a few heady months following the revolution, of how the uprising had prompted a wholesale change in the way Egyptians could use public space.

“There was a kind of love-hate relationship,” says Cluster’s Omar Nagati. “On the one hand there was a romanticisation of this disenfranchised group that had been excluded for many years, and that was now able to redefine what the street is, and to contest their government’s vision. Yet on a personal level there was a daily struggle. For a female walking the street, it was not comfortable.”

Nagati remembers the day that embodied this tension: when the street-sellers in a newly liberated Tahrir Square began to drown out the protesters gathered there for a demonstration. “There was really a transformation from it being a site of protest to a marketplace,” he recalls. “I remember well the day when you could hear that the sound of chanting had been overtaken by the sound of people selling stuff.”

In a way, it’s an anecdote that well embodies the current debate about downtown Cairo. Without a coherent forum or timescale for discussion between the different stakeholders, the debate is currently dominated by those who can shout the loudest - rather than the lower middle-classes who now live or work downtown. As Kareem Ibrahim says: “There is a conflict about downtown but it’s a conflict by the ones who can make their voices heard. What about those who can’t raise their voice?”

Or as one of the voiceless - Ahmed Abdelgalil, sitting in the Turgoman car park - has it: “They don’t care about us, the people.”

Additional reporting: Manu Abdo

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