
international

For Cairo's street vendors, the revolution is not yet fully won

Cairo's street vendors have benefited from the turmoil of post-revolutionary Egypt, and the city's governor has proven more willing to take into account their needs, but their demands still fall on deaf ears at the national level. **Does Vandousselaere** reports.

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Street vendors occupy parking spaces and pavement on Talaat Harp Street in downtown Cairo. Photo: Does Vandousselaere

The Global Urbanist's series on [urban livelihoods](#) last year showed how an inclusive attitude towards street vending can benefit a city and its economy, and how planners can respond to this. [Sally Roever](#) and other contributors rightly argued that policymakers should change their top-down, modernist mindset.

But policymakers have limited leverage. They can only make decisions as far as politicians allow them to. As the experience of Cairo's street vendors shows, informal workers such as street vendors won't enjoy increased inclusion unless they know how to exert pressure on politicians.

Asef Bayat, a professor of sociology at the University of Illinois, has shown how [the rise of informality is deeply linked to the authoritarian and inefficient nature](#) of dictatorial regimes. Lobbying an authoritarian regime like Hosni Mubarak's Egypt to implement a more enlightened policy towards informality might not have much effect, as much of its policy is built on the clientelisation of the civilian elite and the marginalisation of so many of its inhabitants. In these regimes the desperate state of the city is often not a matter of money. Political scientist [Judson Dorman](#) points out that while donor money to upgrade Cairo's informal settlements was abundant, rent-seeking between Mubarak's government and Cairo's construction mafia made any such intervention impossible. Politically, corruption

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was used to make the elite dependent and reduce them to clients currying protection and favour. Offering services to the rest of society risked tilting the political balance, as this would acknowledge their existence as citizens with rights and allow them to make public demands.

So if these factors blocked progress, what if the conditions transformed dramatically, through let's say a revolution? What does this change exactly, and what possibilities does it create for street vendors or informality at large?

BENEFITING FROM REVOLUTIONARY TURMOIL

In Cairo street vendors represent the majority of businesses in most areas, and since the revolution of 25 January 2011 they have been standing up to claim their rights. At times their struggle seemed to bring them success, but in most cases it became apparent that they were merely in line with the political climate: when the country was in turmoil, they were left alone; and when stability came back, they were cracked down on.

The revolutionary crowds on Tahrir Square and its vicinity proved excellent business for street vendors, and when they discovered that no one would obstruct their doing business in the rest of town, they soon claimed the pavements of Cairo's main shopping streets.

The street vendors exemplified wider trends in the city. Omar Nagati, a city planning professor at the Modern Sciences and Arts University in Giza and leader of an initiative to document public space interventions after the revolution, has spoken of how [a local community had built themselves their own highway exit](#). For Nagati street vendors represent a microcosm of a broader issue the city is facing, which is: who decides what is an appropriate use of public space? "The revolution changed these terms and now citizens, not only planners and policymakers, are trying to take matters into their own hands and find a new equilibrium".

HERE TO STAY

Since the revolution, street vendors frequently declared that they were here to stay, and wouldn't leave again, not while they were still breathing. But already in September 2011, Egypt's first glimpse of stability, the transitional military council sent its troops into the main shopping streets to evict them.

This was merely an attempt by the army to show how capable they were of running the country, and certainly not a sign that the regime was back. Egypt again descended into chaos, and again the street vendors reigned the streets, until after a year of tension and violence and a breathtaking presidential election, in June 2012 Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood took power.

His first act was a utopian programme to restore order, make traffic jams disappear and clean up the country in his hundred days in office. Again the street vendors were removed, the only part of the plan that was actually effective.

It might seem unusual that the army or Morsi only dared crack down on this type of informality, and not on informal building, but Nagati attributes this to the fact that they, like the city's micro bus drivers, are a "soft intervention" of informality into the city. "And those are much easier to resolve than apartments which are illegally built on agricultural land, or highway exits to informal areas", Nagati adds. For Bayat, this is a flexibility inherent to street vendors, allowing them to conceal their presence, moderating their activities to delay the moment when the government says it's too much and cracks down. Very much like informal settlements which are first built out of sight.

LEARNING TO ORGANISE

Nagati also attributed the vulnerability of street vendors to their lack of organisation. "They are individuals and they aren't organised in a union, so they cannot stage an organised protest. They have a critical mass, but they are still wrongly seen as easy to reverse."

Cairo governorate spokesman Khaled Mostafa acknowledges that the government is changing tactics: "instead of chasing them, the governorate has a new policy-- trying to organise them. The old method of chasing them and confiscating their goods had catastrophic consequences..."

Yet while the street vendors hold protests to show their dismay at the government, they don't seem keen to enter the political arena and support their opposition. As the union secretary told me: "we don't want a new revolution, but want the revolution and Morsi to succeed."

But in post-revolutionary Egypt things evolve rapidly, and on 26 September 2012 street vendors in Cairo set up the Independent Street Vendors' Union. According to their president Abd El Rahman Mohammed they already have 5,000 members, and as a result of protests they have staged, they have been received by Cairo's governor, the minister of local development, and Mamdouh Hamza (the prominent entrepreneur and chairman of Egypt's largest planning consultancy).

Street vendors often complain about how the media depicts them, but for me this already seems to have changed. Nowadays the media increasingly talks about the street vendors' point of view, and the solutions their organisations propose.

Not only are the vendors and allies like Nagati working on the issue; so is Cairo's governor. As the Egyptian Gazette reported, Cairo governorate spokesman [Khaled Mostafa](#) acknowledges that the government is changing tactics: "instead of chasing them, the governorate has a new policy — trying to organise them. The old method of chasing them and confiscating their goods had catastrophic consequences, because they buy their goods on credit and have to pay back the big traders. But they need to be organised, especially in busy streets where they disrupt the traffic."

The government now tries to organise one-day markets in Cairo where vendors can participate for free. "But it's very difficult to find such places, especially in areas like downtown." Interestingly, the first market will thus be in Dar el-Salam — an informal neighbourhood.

The men behind the vendors' union are all vending on the monumental Ataba Square, whereas the areas the governor wants them to consider are less visible lots in the city's periphery. The governor's proposal might already be a huge improvement over the central government's seeming desire of somehow relocating everything — markets, ministries — to the desert, but the street vendors are determined to get their downtown location officially recognised.

POLITICAL RETURNS

Greater Cairo has approximately one million street vendors, so it will be hard to find a solution for everyone. And not only in terms of finding places for them to trade. While the union members assured me that nobody is bribing the police anymore (as opposed to before the revolution), the excessive violence exercised by the central police force remains a problem as shown by last month's death of a 10-year-old street vendor in central Cairo.

Cairo's governor doesn't seem to have a choice but to compromise with the reality, and this is promising, but it makes one wonder what will happen if the presidency regains legitimacy. Bayat compares street vendors' situations in post-revolutionary Iran and in Egypt after the 1967 defeat, and believes that it is only the exceptional turmoil immediately following revolutionary moments that allows street vendors to flourish temporarily, unless they can capitalise with renewed electoral power.

Indeed there hasn't come one sign from the president that he's open for reform. Even worse, as many commentators have noted, as his party's members come from the upper-middle class, the party's main strategy is seemingly to demonstrate their ability to curtail the country's chaos.

Morsi's early crackdown on street vendors wasn't an isolated event, as Amr Adly, president of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal rights, pointed out to me. When Morsi claimed legislative powers in November he repeated this act. The first decree he issued was one that imposed much harsher penalties on street vendors, doubling jail sentences from three to six months for those caught.

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Maybe this is a smart move, as Egypt's opposition might be even worse. As Nagati says: "while the Brotherhood at least tries to communicate on the grassroots level, the liberals only try to impose their will on the majority." To me this seems to be true; Egyptian commentators, and non-Islamists especially, seem to be obsessed by "the political threat of the poor people". So the idea of including street vendors in democratic decision-making is probably one of the liberals' biggest fears.

But maybe, or luckily, politics won't leave them much choice. The fact that every vote could count in this year's parliamentary elections could give street vendors the ability to influence mainstream politics, and force both Morsi and the opposition to reconsider their disregard for the poor. As Bayat points out, increased political rivalry in India, Mexico, Peru and Chile in the 1970s created the necessity to mobilise the poor, a situation which eventually led to their integration into the state structure and existing institutions.

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