

The Politics of Neglect: the Egyptian State in Cairo, 1974-98

Dorman, W. J.

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Authors

W. J. Dorman

Abstract

This thesis examines state-society relations in Egypt, and the logic of durable authoritarianism since 1952. It does so through an examination of the Egyptian state’s neglectful rule, from the 1970s through the 1990s, of its capital Cairo. In particular, the thesis focuses on state inaction vis-à-vis Cairo’s informal housing sector: those neighbourhoods established on land not officially sanctioned for urbanization.

The central research question of the thesis is to explain why the Egyptian state has been unable to intervene effectively in these informal neighbourhoods—despite their stigmatization in Egyptian public discourse as threats to the nation’s social, moral and political health; the authoritarian state’s considerable unilateral power; and the availability of western assistance for development interventions. The short answer to the question, is that the very factors which sustain the authoritarian political order constrain the Egyptian state’s ability to intervene in its capital. Neglectful rule is a consequence of the autocratic post-1952 dispensation of power.

That this neglect is not simply the result of structural resource constraints, is demonstrated through the examination of donor-funded urban-development projects—aimed at fostering an administratively competent Egyptian state able to intervene in its capital—none of which were successful or sustainable. The failure of these reform initiatives, which could have allowed Egyptian state

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agencies to upgrade informal Cairo and re-orient its growth, can be plausibly explained in terms of the challenges they posed to the logic of autocratic rule. Thus the reproduction of the informal city is, in part, a consequence of the post-1952 dispensation.

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