

Exclusion and Informality: The Praetorian Politics of Land Management in Cairo, Egypt

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Abstract

Since the late 1970s, Western aid agencies, including the US Agency for International Development (AID) and the World Bank, sought to assist the Egyptian government in planning its capital, Cairo. The aim was to foster an administratively competent Egyptian state able to respond, for example, to informal urbanization of the city's agricultural periphery by channelling the city's growth into planned and serviced desert sites. However, these initiatives were almost entirely unsuccessful. Egyptian officials rejected engagement with the informal urbanization process. The projects became enmeshed in bureaucratic struggles over control of valuable state desert land. This article examines these failed planning exercises, first, in order to assess what they indicate about Egypt's authoritarian dispensation of power, in place since 1952 but challenged in the February 2011 overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. It concludes that project failure is diagnostic of the regime's exclusionary nature and the presence of autonomous centres of power such as the Egyptian military. Secondly, the article looks at how this political order shaped Cairo's largely uncontrolled growth by constraining the Egyptian state's capacity to manage it. Thus, urban planning in Cairo reveals how authoritarian power relations have been inscribed upon Egyptian social space.

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