

# REVOLUTION IN PARALLEL TIMES

AN EGYPTIAN VILLAGE'S LIVED REVOLUTION

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# Revolution in Parallel Times: An Egyptian Village's Lived Revolution

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## About the Author

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## Abstract

This paper explores revolutionary and rural politics through the case study of Al-Tahseen, a small village in the Egyptian Delta that witnessed an administrative secessionist movement in 2012 and a lineage of protests since 2008. The paper interrogates the relationship between politics at the rural level and the 25 January revolution in 2011, the 18-day mass protest that led to the ouster of long-time President Hosni Mubarak. Indeed, parallels can be drawn between the protest movement in Al-Tahseen and the 25 January revolution. While the villagers were not part of the latter, they watched it closely on television and modelled their sequence and choice of collective action accordingly. Al-Tahseen experienced its own local revolution, which the villagers consciously differentiated from the 25 January uprising. Through this case study, I explore how protest tactics shift with changing political regimes, and highlight the complicated ways in which rural lived experiences relate to the more popularly known 2011 revolution, which is often seen and described as an urban revolution.

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## Introduction

In this paper, I investigate the revolutionary politics of Al-Tahseen, a village situated at the margins of the grand narrative of the 25 January Egyptian Revolution, understood as the 18-day uprising that led to the ouster of ex-President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Rather than perpetuating prevalent narratives about marginalised rural communities and disempowered farmers, this paper<sup>1</sup> aims to highlight Al-Tahseen's own revolution, which was influenced by the 25 January uprising, but is differentiable from it as well. In effect, Al-Tahseen has its own history of dissent, and according to its people, its own revolution. While protests unfolded in Cairo's Tahrir square in 2011, Al-Tahseen villagers observed closely, hoping the political moment would yield positive change so that they could resume their own local revolution, which began in 2008.

Rural politics is often overshadowed by urban mobilisations. This is particularly the case for literature covering the Arab Spring revolutions. As Reem Saad argues, the story of the Egyptian uprising remains incomplete without taking into account the role of rural politics in shaping national events.<sup>2</sup> In particular, rural Egypt witnessed a new phase of collective action in the decade leading up to 2011, which was marked by an increasing number of protests, new tactics, as well as demands that went beyond land tenure and subsistence.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars<sup>4</sup> actively neglect the village in their accounts of the 25 January revolution, viewing the latter as a *rupture* with the status quo, enabled and carried out by the city *par excellence*. This assertion is hard to challenge considering that Tahrir Square is an iconic symbol of the revolution. Other accounts<sup>5</sup> have attempted to bring the village back into the story by focusing on the participation of rural youth in the 18-day uprising, namely how they travelled to cities (especially Cairo) to join protests, and how they organised popular committees (*legan shaabeya*) to protect their villages in the absence of law enforcement.<sup>6</sup> Still, these accounts tend to spatially configure the 25 January revolution as a city event, temporally fixing it as a sudden mass mobilisation. In doing so, such accounts dictate specific actors as revolutionary, overlooking others that also contributed to the uprising and its aftermath. This in turn questions how we define 'the revolution'; is it 25 January or is it the larger, pluralistic mobilisation of which the latter was the epitome?

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on an ethnography carried out from September 2012 to October 2015, through several trips to Al-Tahseen, in addition to a number of interviews intermittently conducted between December 2016 and January 2019. I refer to Al-Tahseen as a village, given that many of its inhabitants consider it as such, rather than an *'ezba*, which is its official designation according to the country's system of administrative division.

<sup>2</sup> Reem Saad, 'Before the Spring: Shifting Patterns of Protest in Rural Egypt' in A. Ghazal and J. Hanssen (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Saskia Sassen, 'The Global Street: Making the Political', *Globalizations* 8/5 (2011), pp. 573–9.

<sup>5</sup> Lila Abu Lughod, 'Living the "Revolution" in an Egyptian Village: Moral Action in a National Space', *American Ethnologist* 39/1 (2012), pp. 21–5.

<sup>6</sup> Asya El-Meehy, 'Egypt's Popular Committees: From Moments of Madness to NGO Dilemmas', *Middle East Report* 265 (2012), pp. 29–33.

Commentators have consequently spoken of ‘two revolutions’ or a mobilisation at ‘two fronts’; one characterised by mass protests for better livelihoods, while the other refers to a smaller group of activists fighting for longer-lasting, structural change.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I refer to ‘the 25 January revolution’ as the 18-day uprising that led to the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak. While my interlocutors in the village refer to ‘the revolution’ or *al-thawra*, mainly to denote those 18 days, they say ‘our revolution’ or *thawretna* in reference to their ongoing struggle for rights and justice in Al-Tahseen specifically. The villagers temporally consider the 25 January revolution as the 18-day uprising, while viewing their own in Al-Tahseen as a long-term and ongoing struggle.

Some scholars have drawn attention to the series of farmer-led revolts in both Tunisia and Egypt before, during and after their respective revolutions in 2011. However, such narratives have often been disregarded by the media.<sup>8</sup> The ethnographic work presented in this paper builds on this strand of overlooked narratives but reaches different conclusions about the relationship of Al-Tahseen – a *marginalised*<sup>9</sup> village – to the 25 January revolution. I argue that Al-Tahseen’s connection or involvement with the latter is complex and goes beyond unilateral assessments of direct participation in protests. While the villagers did not physically partake in the 25 January revolution, they watched it on television closely and modelled their timeline and choice of local collective actions accordingly. They consciously differentiated their modes of dissent from protests at the national level, while learning from urban activists’ tactics and mistakes. Through its radical politics of secession, and its dis-identification with opposition politics, Al-Tahseen’s mobilisation simultaneously represents rural politics in its most defiant and acquiescent forms.

## Welcome to Al-Tahseen

Al-Tahseen is a small village of 3,000 inhabitants on the Nile Delta, in the Daqahleya governorate. For decades, it faced a lack of basic services, like many other impoverished villages in the Delta and Upper Egypt. It is nonetheless important to highlight Al-Tahseen’s history in particular, because of its significance in shaping the villagers’ struggle and demands. In effect, Al-Tahseen was the product of a socialist project during the agrarian reform period (1952–61). It was constructed as a hub for certain agricultural products, whereby farmers were provided with financial and in-kind resources as part of the state’s plan to improve agricultural production<sup>10</sup> (hence the name *Al-Tahseen*, meaning ‘betterment’ in

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Shokr, ‘Reflections on Two Revolutions’, *Middle East Report* 265 (2012), pp. 2–12.

<sup>8</sup> Habib Ayebe and Ray Bush, ‘Small Farmer Uprisings and Rural Neglect in Egypt and Tunisia’, *Middle East Report* 272 (2014), pp. 2–10.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Tahseen’s ‘marginalisation’ refers to its physical isolation; its inadequate road infrastructure, lack of connectivity to the rest of the governorate, the absence of law enforcement as well as the lack of media coverage it receives. Despite these forms of marginalisation, this paper demonstrates that Al-Tahseen is certainly not at the margins of Egyptian revolutionary history.

<sup>10</sup> The agrarian reform led by Nasser in 1952–61, which called an end to the feudal system, was premised on ensuring a fair division of land among citizens. Law 178 also aimed to change the relationship between landowners and tenant farmers, whereby the farmer would pay a small amount of rent to the

Arabic). With Nasser's death, and the introduction of neoliberal reforms in the 1980s, Al-Tahseen's infrastructure decayed, particularly after Law 96 was issued in 1992, officially ending the agrarian reform period, cancelling land rent, and privatising agricultural associations. The state's economic system, which had been supportive of small farmers, was suddenly replaced by one controlled by the free market economy and reliant on the success of large agrarian companies.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the state required farmers to pay for the land they toil according to the market price. While some were able to do so, others were still mired in debt and forced to leave their lands. Agriculture remains the village's main source of revenue, but rather than providing produce to the state, Al-Tahseen now works for foreign companies who control the farmers' means of subsistence, particularly corn, the village's key commodity. This history is crucial in defining the villagers' complicated relationship to the state, specifically their perspectives on the state's role in their lives and their duties as farmers contributing to the food basket (and progress) of the nation. Al-Tahseen's villagers are haunted by the spectre of Nasser's welfare state – a history that continues to shape their expectations of government.

For a long time, Al-Tahseen was trapped in a vicious cycle of economic and social deprivation, characterised by a lack of essential social services and infrastructure, including health clinics, educational institutions and sewage systems in addition to systematic obstacles that undermine its agricultural activities. Al-Tahseen's entrapment is exacerbated by the poor condition of its main road, which connects the villagers to what they call 'the outer world' (*al-'alam al-kharegy*). Al-Tahseen's only access to essential services (such as schools, health clinics, government offices, markets) is at Shammās, a neighbouring village that can be reached through a 3-kilometre, narrow dirt path (bordered by a canal on one side and farm lands on the other) that the villagers call 'the death road'. In their collective imagination, fixing it is the key to solving all their problems. Furthermore, at the end of the road is an unfenced bridge that is subject to multiple collapses every year and serves as the village's only entrance. It has caused several car accidents and physical incidents, of which a particularly haunting one in the village's collective memory is of a bride and groom who fell off while being paraded on their wedding day. For the people of Al-Tahseen, the 'the death road' signifies their isolation; being stuck in time and place, and thus became a key site and symbol of their struggle and collective demands.

## Al-Tahseen's Movement (2008–18)

Starting in 2008, the villagers, who were inspired by the 6 April movement of the same year, started protesting collectively, both in Al-Tahseen and in front of the municipality building of Bany Ebeid (within a 30-minute drive from the village). Following several weeks of protest and local reporting on the movement, the Egyptian army interfered and built the village's only school; a multi-storey primary school on land purchased through

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landowner and gain legal protection against arbitrary evictions (farmers were equally allocated four and a half acres of land, which the state retained ownership of).

<sup>11</sup> Ayeb and Bush, 'Small Farmer Uprisings'.



Al-Tahseen's local fund, which was established by the villagers in the early 2000s. This collective fund is based on a head tax that villagers pay to fulfil their basic needs, such as providing alternative sewage systems through trenches (as part of a national scheme to increase safe drinking water in the country with the village having access to clean water in 2010). Meanwhile, the village's electric generator only provides electricity to half of its inhabitants, depriving them of all using electricity at the same time. Through their collective fund, the villagers managed to create their own sewage treatment and rubbish collection systems, build their own community mosque, and provide alternative modes of transportation to the 'outside world' with the use of *tuktuks*.

When protests broke out on 25 January 2011, only 2 of my 70 respondents from the village reported participating in the uprising. A year later, in January 2012, the villagers held a sit-in and declared a hunger strike<sup>12</sup> at the municipality administration building of Bany Ebeid, demanding that the school be equipped with better educational infrastructure. However, these calls were ignored, and the villagers consequently declared civil disobedience on 9 September (the beginning of the new academic year), reasserting the need for adequate school equipment and essential roadworks. In response, the governor of Daqahleya verbally promised to allocate funds for the road. The students in turn declared a strike on 15 September to pressure him to formalise the decision and, three days later, the villagers announced a hunger strike in the municipal building to protest against the governor's inaction. The villagers subsequently declared administrative secession from the governorate, stating that they would only engage with the presidency thereafter. Alongside this declaration, a protest took place in front of the governorate's building in Daqahleya as well. On 19 September, Al-Tahseen protestors moved their demonstrations to the street overlooking the presidential palace in Cairo (occupied at the time by ex-President Mohamed Morsi) where they thought they would have a better chance of being heard. The villagers took the secession very seriously, banning state representatives from entering the village, including school teachers. They refused to negotiate with the governor of Daqahleya and instead directly asked the president to invest resources into Al-Tahseen's school and main road. The villagers also refused to pay water and electricity bills, although it is unclear how they dealt with land rents, as it appears that some renters kept paying. In the following fiscal year (2013–14), the village was allocated a notable budget for road construction, which began but was never completed. No further funds were allocated afterwards, and by 2018 the partially built road collapsed again.

After a long period of silence, following the regime change on 30 July 2013, and the ousting of ex-President Morsi, the people of Al-Tahseen renewed protest efforts in early 2014. However, the changing political climate and rising repression prompted them to

<sup>12</sup> News reports on the village became scarce post-2014, especially with the increasing restrictions on free expression. However, the administrative secession, which was declared through a Facebook page that no longer exists, garnered the attention of various online newspapers. For instance, it received coverage in Nada El-Kouny's article 'Egyptian Delta Village Declares "Independence" After Decades of Neglect', *Ahram Online*, 1 October 2012. Available at <https://bit.ly/3oXulzG> (accessed 19 January 2021).

critically change their tactics, while preserving the core objectives of their movement. From then on, they omitted any mention of civil disobedience or administrative secession. Instead, they renewed their demands for road funding to be disbursed through the state budget. Certainly, the military's ascension to power was a significant moment that affected their movement prompting the villagers to change how they voiced their demands, as well as their views on the prospects of mobilisation and achieving transformative change. In effect, protest tactics were revised as state repression against activists escalated. During my visit to Al-Tahseen in 2015, the villagers shared that they were collecting bail money for men who were arrested during a large protest against water pollution in the village. Ironically, the people arrested were falsely charged with polluting the water, rather than for protesting against it. This experience of unlawful arrest marked a lesson for the villagers: even within the confines of their small village, protests were not tolerated. Despite this, they led more in 2016, both in Al-Tahseen and at the municipal building, reiterating their demands for new road constructions and expressing their objection to the dumping of industrial waste cargo in the village. In 2018, more protests took place and will likely continue to occur as long as Al-Tahseen remains isolated and continuously deprived of basic services.

Despite this, the villagers still cite their 21 days of civil disobedience in 2012 as their moment of dignity and history-making. Similar to the 25 January revolution, in which the 18-day uprising was considered utopian, the people of Al-Tahseen talk of their own revolution (the 21 days of civil disobedience) as a utopic experience that included a sense of unprecedented (albeit short-lived) unity, as well as an embodiment of the future in the present, whereby villagers worked together to clean the streets, better their production, lives and services. Ahmed, the village lawyer, recounts:

I told them that a necessary condition to attaining success was to not have leadership. We didn't have a leader, we moved ourselves. I proposed an idea, we discussed it, and we voted on it. If the majority agreed on the idea, we all agreed. It was a kind of direct democracy which we implemented in the village during the 21-day action.

With regular meetings in the mosque (its microphone key in helping gather the village members), the mobilisation efforts at all stages were described as horizontal and leaderless. In other words, the utopia and extraordinariness of revolution was experienced at the local level in Al-Tahseen's 21 days of civil disobedience. This collective experience calls into question how Al-Tahseen's movement relates to the 25 January revolution.

## Al-Tahseen's Movement as a Local Revolution

When asked about the 2011 revolution, most villagers described the event as a great achievement they witnessed on television. Only two of over 70 respondents actually left Al-Tahseen to take part in the demonstrations. More interestingly, when asked about the relationship between their local mobilisation and the 25 January revolution, the villagers distanced their actions from the latter. Sobhy (interviewed in 2014) was not interested in

expressing his personal views on the 2011 revolution. Instead, he insisted that Al-Tahseen had been mobilising prior to this, noting that the latter did not trigger the village's efforts towards collective action: 'The entire thing [*our* revolution] was in our head before the 25 January revolution'. Other villagers go further to claim that the January 2011 revolution was inspired by their own. Ali, for example, explained:

I watched the [25 January] revolution on TV [...] I supported it, because you can regard us as the first people to have revolted. We are like the first people to have carried out a revolution, and maybe the reason for the nation-wide revolution is Al-Tahseen's. Why? Because we didn't have sewage, or asphalt on the road, or schools. We were cut off from the world. It's over, what do we have left [to worry about]? [...] we either get our rights, or just die where we are.

Ali's statement highlights the complex relationship between Al-Tahseen and the events following 25 January. It brings up the two different uses of the term 'revolution' that I allude to above, whereby *al-thawra* denotes the national event and its metanarrative, while *thawretna* (our revolution) and *thawret Al-Tahseen* (Al-Tahseen's revolution) evokes the particular, the contingent and the local.

Not only does Al-Tahseen place itself discursively at a distance from the 25 January revolution, the village's political contentions are *temporally* distinguishable from it, too. The villagers observed the protests in Tahrir Square closely, not as their own cause requiring direct participation in, but sometimes to express support for the revolutionaries, and other times to judge them. When the protests erupted in Cairo, the villagers in Al-Tahseen waited until January of the following year to start voicing their demands and mobilising in the lead up to their declaration of administrative secession from the governorate in September 2012 (during the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood). With the ousting of President Morsi in 2013, and the subsequent military takeover, the village consciously halted its mobilisation. This break was not necessarily driven by the intimidating nature of the military-backed government, which actively cracked down on protests since its ascension to power. Indeed, Al-Tahseen resumed its protest in early 2014, voicing the same demands while minimising any mention of 'civil disobedience' or 'secession'. The timeline of Al-Tahseen's intermittent mobilisations illustrates the ways in which the village negotiates its tactics and position vis-à-vis national politics, namely how it engages with the latter and actively differentiates itself from it. The village's relationship to the 25 January revolution showcases this temporal engagement, whereby Al-Tahseen's own timeline is inspired by, but not identical to, the chronology of the January uprising. The parallels or similarities between both were already clear in 2008, when the 6 April Youth Movement organised a national general strike in support of the strike declared by the militant workers of El-Mahalla El-Kubra, an event that shook all major cities in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> When talking about Al-Tahseen's movement (*hiraak Al-Tahseen*), Ahmed, the village lawyer, always starts from the 6 April general strike of 2008. While neither he, nor any of his fellow villagers joined, it was very consequential

<sup>13</sup> Rabab El-Mahdi, 'Labour Protests in Egypt: Causes and Meanings', *Review of African Political Economy* 38/129 (2011), pp. 387–402.

for them. According to Ahmed, 2008 revealed the nationwide injustice that existed and that people were doing something to address it. Ahmed recounted his first protest experience in the village, which happened a few months later in September 2008. The wait time between the general strike and the village protest was not accidental, it was rather well calculated. Indeed, when national politics is marked by significant urban protests and oppositional politics,<sup>14</sup> the villagers suspend their own plans for protest until there is enough room for their voices to be heard at the national level. The same logic seems to apply when considering the village's relationship to the 2011 uprisings.

When asked about their own movement in Al-Tahseen, the village lawyer Ahmed distinguishes it from the 25 January revolution, stating:

After the revolution, we thought we would have the patience to wait two to three years until the state becomes stable, to not overburden it and contribute to its destruction ...so that when we choose to revolt, the situation would have already been stable; there would have been an elected parliament in place, a president, stable state institutions – institutions that are complete, including the state, constitution, president, parliament... We could then start voicing our demands. But we had to wait again. Now [post 2013–14], the state has no parliament to help, the presidency has never-ending problems, and there is terrorism.

The villagers largely justify their timeline for collective action based on these reasons and set it apart from what many of them described as the selfish, sector-based, protest demands of the 25 January revolutionaries. The villagers contrast the patience, selflessness and patriotism of their approach to the disruptions and instability caused by the 25 January revolution and its aftermath. While Al-Tahseen residents actively choose to *dis-identify* with the latter, they still observed the revolution closely, hoping it would succeed in bringing about transformative change that would improve their livelihoods. Sheikh Abdallah explained how:

during the days of the *thawra* [revolution], all people and every sector took part in the demonstrations; workers in factories – even the authority responsible for security took part [*most likely referring to the police*] [...] maybe even the judges took part [...] it's only the farmer who did not.

The Sheikh explained that farmers, who comprise 60 percent of society, are the 'only group who have not participated during the days of the demonstrations (*ayam el-mozah-rat*)'. This statement reflects his perception of farmers as selfless, and his articulation of their superior role during the revolution in their choice to refrain from burdening a nation in flux. Yet most notably here, the statement outlines the temporal differentiation of the village's mobilisation from the January 2011 revolution. While the Sheikh does not deny the protests and demands of the village, he is keen to highlight that the farmers did not take part in the 18-day uprising of 25 January 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed and others sometimes refer to national politics as politics of 'the country' (*il-balad*), or 'in Egypt' (*fi Masr*) or 'in Cairo' (*fil Qahira*). Despite the local nature of the El-Mahalla Strike and its location (outside Cairo), it spread and became a general, nationwide strike. For the villagers, the ensuing events in Cairo and Alexandria turned this local event into a political moment of national scale.



Even though the villagers were not part of the latter, they expected it to positively affect their livelihoods. Adam explains, ‘We participated with our hearts; we were watching and supporting the revolution back then. But now, there is no revolution. As long as there is no change, there is no revolution.’ Similarly, 55-year-old Hossam exclaimed: ‘Revolution?! What revolution?’ He recounted the pervasive corruption of the police force, asserting that there could be no revolution as long as people’s lived realities remain the same. One of the main ways that desperation is embodied at the local level is through the criminalisation of protest: the villagers were aware of the restrictions imposed by the post-2013 Protest Legislation (law 107), which became a barrier to their mobilisation – one that they needed to strategise against in order to overcome. Perhaps the most critical way the villagers revisited their strategy was by abandoning the narrative of ‘administrative secession’ when General El-Sisi was appointed president in July 2014. Ahmed the lawyer explained the impact of the new regime on the villagers’ tactics:

They criminalise every objection that has a loud voice, or uses demonstrations, or direct action. Imagine if we were to come now and talk about administrative secession, or if anyone declared administrative secession? I swear to God, the state security [*al-amn al-watany*] would detain 90 percent of the secessionists by the next morning.

In other words, regime change and broader shifts in national politics did not put an end to Al-Tahseen’s movement. However, it prompted the need to re-evaluate and change protest tactics.

**Table 1: A Parallel Timeline of Contentions**

Year	Politics at the National Scale	Al-Tahseen
2006	Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra protests	Articles in national papers on Al-Tahseen’s deprivation
2008	April: Al-Mahalla General Strike	September: protest in Mansoura city (demands: roadworks and school equipment)
2011	January: Popular uprising that overthrew President Mubarak, known as the 25 January revolution.	
2012		January: protests and hunger strike (demands: roadworks and school equipment)
		9 September: civil disobedience declared
		15 September: student strike
		18 September: threat of secession and hunger strike
		21 September: Al-Tahseen declares administrative secession declared and hunger strike ended
		27 September: lawsuit against governor

Year	Politics at the National Scale	Al-Tahseen
2013	July: regime change/new transitional government and new protest law.	
2014	June: El-Sisi elected as president	April: movement returns without secession language (demands: budget for road completion)
2015		November: water pollution protest and arrests
2016	April: Land Day protests	November: protests demanding road reconstruction and against industrial waste cargo polluting the village
2018		June: protests break out as the village's allocated budget does not cover the roadworks

## Redefining 'The Political'

Al-Tahseen villagers, who declared secession from the Daqahleya governorate, claimed they were not 'political'. After explaining how El-Sisi restricted their efforts to mobilise post-2014, Adam (who permanently resides in Al-Tahseen but works occasionally in Cairo) stated: 'As far as we are concerned, we neither know of politics nor understand [it].'

One way the villagers view their engagement as *apolitical* is in that they do not claim who should be in office. For example, the lawyer Ahmed explained: 'We do not care who is in power, we only care about the service provided'. Ahmed, who played a significant role in organising mosque meetings, and mobilising youth for protests, hunger strike and civil disobedience, maintains a negative view of politicians (*al-siyaseyeen*). To him, the latter are not necessarily only those in power, but those who seek it, as well as those who tried to exploit Al-Tahseen's mobilisation and use it for political gains. This negative view is not only reserved for politicians, *al-siyaseyeen*, but also for certain types of political activity, including participation in demonstrations (*al-muthaharaat*). When asked in 2015 about the villagers' plans to take their mobilisation further, Samer exclaimed: 'No, no demonstrations! We have nothing to do with demonstrations! We here are good, poor farmers. [...] we have nothing to do with calls for demonstrations.' When I asked about the mobilisation that the village undertook, Samer quickly clarified: 'Yes we did that, a protest for the [construction of the] road. That was a protest (*ihtijaf*), not demonstrations (*mush muthaharat yaani*).' Samer was not the only person to make this distinction. Perhaps borne out of the necessity of the post-2013 moment, the village actively distinguished its actions from the ones undertaken by national activists (while holding Al-Tahseen's activism in higher regard). Distinguishing between protests and demonstrations is peculiar, in that many respondents outlined the negative connotations of 'demonstrations', describing them as 'disruptive', 'political' and 'sector-based' – all of which are adjectives popularised by the post-2013 media machine. This contrasts to Al-Tahseen's protests and acts of civil disobedience, which were viewed as 'defensive', 'social' and 'for the common

good'. Unpacking the differences between the terms 'demonstration' and 'protest' is important here, although it requires deeper investigation into the historical and affective modes through which the villagers relate to them. Suffice to add that the performance of demonstrations (the Arabic verb *tathahur*) embodies a physical act of visibility, whereby the body performs the act of objection in an exposing or public way. Protest (*ihitijaf*), on the contrary, can be a silent, verbal or ideological mode of expression that does not bring the physicality of objection into the picture, and therefore might be viewed as the safer or less confrontational option.

Politics is not only defined thematically (for instance, by the decision to partake in party politics or not), or discursively (in comparing 'demonstrations' and 'protests' as mentioned above). Politics is also defined in spatial terms and is often assumed to take place at the national level rather than the local. From the villagers' perspective, protests at the 'local level' are tied to the struggle for better livelihoods of everyday citizens, while the 'national level' is often viewed as the selfish race to power. For the villagers, the fact that the 2008 general strike called for better working conditions for tens of thousands of El-Mahalla workers who protested against increased food prices nationwide seems to be eclipsed by the national scale and weight of the event. Similarly, the fact that the 25 January revolution rose in response to both police brutality and the impoverishment of ordinary citizens is obscured to the villagers by its political consequences, namely the resulting referenda, parliamentary and presidential elections, and the competition between political parties for their foothold in government. The villagers' belief in the apolitical nature of their protest actions can be better understood by taking into account their negative view of politicians. The irony lies in the fact that villagers would describe their secessionist movement as a development that lies outside the realm of politics – an assertion perhaps best reflected in the expression: 'the pragmatic politics of the poor'.<sup>15</sup> While this binary perspective posits the national and local as two separate spheres (with the latter described as apolitical), this dichotomy makes little sense upon closer inspection.

In fact, many of these complexities between the local and the national can be illustrated through the villagers' perception of security measures and narratives that were prominent in Egypt's post-2014 era. Indeed, many villagers noticeably give El-Sisi credit for the security (*al-amn*) they enjoy. This statement might have passed unnoticed, except that in a village that remains marginalised and that generally lacks law enforcement mechanisms and police presence, the populace's views on security foregrounds the impact of the national narrative on their perceptions of security in the village. Adam, who denies any knowledge or understanding of politics, explains that El-Sisi is restrictive, but nonetheless provides security: 'We are living in security, so it is not bad. The situation is not bad'. What 'living in security' means for the villagers is, however, very different from in the city, where it may mean less crime, more police presence and a semblance of law and order. In Al-Tahseen, I could extract two ways in which the villagers related to 'security' – none of which is a product of their local realities, but rather of their engagement with national politics, and particularly their

<sup>15</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 16.

consumption of state media narratives. First, several villagers viewed their relative security in juxtaposition to the struggles of the Syrian diaspora following the Syrian revolution and subsequent conflict. When asked about what he meant by 'security', Sameh exclaimed:

Did you see the Syrians and what they are doing? Did you see the people who were forcibly displaced from their homes? We are staying here, even if we [only] eat bread and heat it on fire!

This statement aligns with grand narratives circulating on Egyptian television that highlight how the army has arguably saved the country from falling into civil war. This perception of security is thus constructed in relation to the lack thereof in a country so similar to Egypt, not the least in its experience of an extraordinary revolution. Second, 'security' is viewed as the guarantee of law and order at the national level. When asked whether the police are now more readily available to protect the village, Adam denied this, clarifying that Egypt as a whole is safer; that 'we all live in security'. This view is mostly informed by the dominant state media narrative that characterises the country as safe from both crime and civil war, but has no material implications for a marginalised village such as Al-Tahseen. In fact, after arguing in favour of the security enjoyed under El-Sisi's presidency, Sameh continued to elaborate on the number of deaths due to accidents on the village's 'death road'. This ironic exchange is therefore better understood by taking into consideration the village's complex relationship to the government and nation.

## Nation, Government, Village

The villagers are positioned in unique ways in relation to different levels of government and changes that occur within them. The 'nation', a term which encompasses national interest and the common good, is usually juxtaposed to the 'government', which suggests inaction, corruption and failure. Al-Tahseen's very unique relationship to the nation, as the product of a social engineering project, lies at the core of the villagers' contentious notions of local and national politics. Here, the origin story of Al-Tahseen is crucial. While some villagers shared their feeling of indebtedness to the nation, for creating Al-Tahseen out of desert lands, another group mentioned that their fathers were the ones who transformed the village from desert into a 'paradise'. Sheikh Abdallah, from the local mosque, expressed his gratitude to the state, which he described as a 'father' that gifts his 'children' with land, resources and life. Some, however, resist the notion that the state created the village or had any beneficial impact on it. For instance, Ahmed the lawyer shared his views on the villagers' fundamental role in making Al-Tahseen liveable:

The state gave the land to the farmers. It was a barren and infertile land. The people suffered tremendously – our grandparents and parents died for the land while they were reconstructing it. The land started to generate produce and the farmers started to reap its fruits. Yet, after thirty years, in the nineties, the state sold it to us at market price, on a sale day, not at its price when we acquired it.

This statement reflects the villagers' relationship to nationalism. While the Sheikh and other villagers give significant credit and gratitude to the state, seeing it as a generous



source of gifts whereby citizens are passive recipients, others like Ahmed and many of Al-Tahseen's youth claim the state, land and the very life they live as a product of their own (and of their parents and grandparents') legacies, thus highlighting their agency. This, in turn, has significant consequences on their understanding of their rights and their view of politics. Al-Tahseen's youth are more articulate about change as a struggle in which they have to engage, while the elders largely wait for the state to generously grant them better livelihoods. This is not to say that the people of Al-Tahseen necessarily fall within one of these two archetypes. The situation is certainly more fluid than such a dichotomy can suggest. For example, while speaking of the state as a paternal figure, Sheikh El-Balad, an elder village leader equivalent to the *Omda* in other villages,<sup>16</sup> mentions how the state inflicted poverty on its own people by denying them their basic rights. These varying views therefore reflect the villagers' complex relationship with Al-Tahseen, their government and the nation. Regardless, due to the village's history and its particular role in the national project, administrative secession was emphasised as a separation from the governorate, not the nation as a whole.

While the village's history led to a mixed view of the country at large, the people of Al-Tahseen generally believed that the government failed to guarantee reciprocity in its relationship with them. Sheikh El-Balad explained:

Land for a price, walls for a price, electricity for a price, water for a price [...] but when I demand my legitimate right, I cannot find it, why am I paying then? And what am I paying for? Why have I paid for this piece of land then?

His words echoing shared sentiments within the community. In some cases, my interlocutors did not differentiate between local and central government and referred to *hukoomah* ('government') as one entity. This seemed to be the case when both local and central government were seen as corrupt or as helpless and lacking budgets. Nevertheless, distinctions between different levels of government were notable during Morsi's presidency in 2013 when the villagers focused blame on the central government for its imposed budget on local administrations and the lack of municipal elections during that period. For example, as Sheikh El-Balad explains: 'We did not elect the governor so we can't really say that he is accountable, but we did elect the president, and he is the person accountable to us.' However, in more recent interviews, starting in 2014, the central government was often described as well-meaning, while local councils were deemed corrupt – as reflected in Hossam's statement: 'The entire problem of the state lies within the local council.' This shift to placing the blame on the local and finding excuses for the national government might very well be one of the strategic tactics adopted by the villagers to practise dissent in times of shrinking civil spaces. Thus blaming the local government instead of the national leadership perhaps represents a pragmatic shift in tactics to navigate the changing political context.

<sup>16</sup> *Omda* is the traditional title of the village chief, who is also a government official. Because Al-Tahseen is not officially considered a village, it does not have its own *Omda*, but Sheikh El-Balad acts as its de facto chief.

## Changing Times, Tactics and Politics

Al-Tahseen's movement offers a unique lens on the practice of politics in changing political climates. The village has been fighting to construct its main road since 2008 – a struggle which continues to this day. While rising authoritarianism and repression did not destroy their movement, it certainly slowed it down, prompting villagers to change their protest tactics. The need to do so was evident from early on, as the country's political polarisation exacerbated in the aftermath of the 2013 coup and the Rab'aa massacre in August of the same year. During this period, any semblance of political opposition was portrayed by the media as linked to the Muslim Brotherhood – a crime in its own right. The latter was, in turn, outlawed as an alleged terrorist organisation.<sup>17</sup> The situation gave rise to two opposing camps: those who supported the transitional government led by El-Sisi; and those who sympathised with or continued to fight for the Muslim Brotherhood's fallen administration. This challenging political climate paralysed Al-Tahseen for a while and called upon the people to re-strategise. Ahmed, the village lawyer, shared his reflections on such tensions: 'I am defending people. They are neither Muslim brothers nor [any of this] crap [...], they are our friends, our loved ones, our brethren'. Because of this, Ahmed outlined the village's need to intricately navigate their collective position vis-à-vis this polarisation or 'clash' (*sedam*) on the national level, and to find space to voice their demands while avoiding entanglements in 'unnecessary politics'. Ahmed pointed out that civic space had shrunk by 2014, when the 2013 Protest Law was passed, criminalising public gatherings:

I say, sir, I don't like the Muslim Brotherhood, but El-Sisi is not the saviour or a God [...] We haven't elected a leader, we elected a president, a head of state. If he does well, I will clap for him, and if he does badly, I will criticise him... but in turn, [the regime] criminalises dissent.

Sheikh Abdallah of Al-Tahseen's mosque (the village's primary space for civic mobilisation) spoke of the need to shift protest tactics to adapt to changes in the political landscape:

What we used to do back then cannot be done again today: the Brotherhood could not have been dealt with in a different way... that was what worked with them. But [the same tactics] won't work with the government we have today.

While the Sheikh spoke optimistically about El-Sisi's government in 2014, others viewed the security state and El-Sisi as a repressive counter-revolutionary force. For example, Emad, a middle-aged farmer, compared El-Sisi to Syria's Bashar Al-Assad, accusing both of 'depleting the political soil and life of the country'. Emad expressed his political despair, wondering: 'Even if another revolution takes place, who will come to power?'

<sup>17</sup> A court order in 2014 banned the Muslim Brotherhood organisation, and dissolved its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, while confiscating the assets of its members. For more information see: 'Egypt Court Bans Muslim Brotherhood Political Wing', *BBC*, 9 August 2014. Available at <https://bbc.in/35SW791> (accessed 19 January 2021).

Moreover, this polarised environment prompted people to negotiate belonging and different conceptualisations of public interest – linked to views on nationalism. More specifically, in light of dominant narratives on the ‘interests of the nation’, Al-Tahseen’s demands were instantly re-categorised by many of its people as a matter of ‘private interest’. While striving for the common good remained Al-Tahseen’s core objective, views changed on what this meant. In 2012, the ‘community’ referred to the village for many of my interlocutors, while in the years that followed and particularly post-2014, it referred to all Egyptians. The Suez Canal megaproject, launched in 2014, is an interesting example of the ways in which the villagers largely prioritised ‘national interest’, which justified postponing collective action in Al-Tahseen until the canal project was completed. However, a group of younger villagers maintained the view that their local demands ought to take precedence, while acknowledging that public opinion was not on their side, especially at a time when ‘the president gave up 50 percent of his salary for the Canal construction’, as one of them mentioned. They went on to say: ‘If it weren’t for the Suez Canal, we would not have been silenced.’ Al-Tahseen post-2014 thus highlights the villagers’ turn towards less contentious political tactics, but also expresses the contending views of its now far-from-united inhabitants.

With the outbreak of the Land Protests in April 2016, in response to the cession of the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi Arabia, and the resulting mass arrests,<sup>18</sup> protests became more costly than ever. In November 2018, I talked to a community activist named Ahmed, while the villagers were discussing a potential protest plan (again, for fixing their ‘death road’, which was particularly unsafe then due to winter floods):

It is not a question of protest, it is a choice of where, when and in what ways. We were arrested right here in our village on charges of water pollution as we were protesting against the very water that poisons us and our children. You have to tread carefully with this government, really.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between Al-Tahseen’s local uprising and movement and the 25 January revolution in 2011 investigating the way in which politics is perceived at the local level, and how this perception is constructed in relation to the January uprising and the nation more broadly. In doing so, it has explored the connections between the local and the national, the particular and the general, the everyday person and the revolutionary. For future research, it is necessary to investigate the ways in which everyday people become revolutionary; how incremental actions of resistance turn into larger, growing movements, and how the latter are negotiated, put on hold, and renewed in times of changing political circumstances at the national level. I have tried in this paper

<sup>18</sup> For more information on the arrests, see: Declan Walsh, ‘Egypt sentences 152 to Prison for Protest over Transfer of Islands’, *The New York Times*, 14 May 2016. Available at <https://nyti.ms/2NdOtPP> (accessed 19 January 2021).

to emphasise the villagers' distinct position; neither as part of the January revolution, nor completely excluded from it. Instead, I propose viewing the mobilising village as one in constant engagement and negotiation with politics at the national scale more generally. Instead of bringing the village to the centre of the January 2011 revolution, I insist that Al-Tahseen forms a contingent reality for a national event that is hard to pinpoint as singular, exclusive or specific. By investigating particular revolutions as lived by their multiple actors, we may arrive at a view of the January 2011 revolution as a pluralistic, fluid and boundaryless phenomenon. While the village felt despair at the failures of 2011, and many other localised revolutions nationwide felt so as well, cases like Al-Tahseen are a call for hope, showing that the struggle for better livelihoods never ends. While 'the national' does affect the prospects of mobilisation at the local level, it does not completely undermine them either. It merely redraws the parameters – well illustrated by the case of Al-Tahseen.





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