

DRINKING WATER PROTESTS IN EGYPT AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

From the second half of 2007 till January 2008, Egypt has witnessed a wave of about 40 protests* about the absence of basic rights with relation to drinking water. This shows that thirst protests or intifadas, as some people have called them, started to represent a new path for a social movement that accompanies protests to obtain bread. Thus, obtaining a drop of water and a crust of bread have become among the most significant features of the anger bubbling in Egyptian chests. The most tragic situation may have been the death of a lady under a water tractor, while racing other women to win a jerry can of clean water.¹

The protests emerged against a background of official declarations and statistics that point out to a 95.5% increase in the rate of total households connected to the public drinking water network, at the rate of 98.8% of the urban and 92.9% of the rural population.² This indicates an important paradox about the contradictions surrounding the reality of drinking water in Egypt. At the time when the rate of households connected to drinking water networks having been increasing during the past 10 years, according to relevant official statistics, a question poses itself: why then the protests? This paper is trying to address this question through researching the reasons behind the emergence of the protests related to drinking water, particularly in the light of the fact that Egypt is among the water-poor countries or even countries that suffer from water scarcity. This is reflected in the average annual per capita share of water which did not exceed 860 cubic meters in 2003³, less than the 1,000-cubic meter mark for water poverty. This means that Egypt is one of the countries that suffer from water poverty.

The future per capita share of clean water is not expected to increase, particularly that the total expected water resources in 2017 will not exceed 87.76 billion cubic meters according to Egypt's Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation⁴, 10.56 billion cubic meters of which are allocated to drinking water and health uses, a 3.14 billion cubic meter increase compared to 1997. Egypt's population is expected to reach 91 million in 2017⁵. In the light of such forecasts, average per capita share of drinking water is expected to reach only 114 cubic meters in 2017, a figure that reflects severe scarcity.

This raises many questions about future scenarios for addressing the status of drinking water, particularly in the light of the challenges imposed by this problem. There is a need for further research and study which would be difficult to address in the framework of this paper. Thus, we will restrict ourselves to attempting to address the question posed by this paper.

FEATURES OF PROTEST MOVEMENTS RELATED TO DRINKING WATER IN EGYPT

It may be the first time that Egypt witnesses this escalating number of protest movements related to drinking water which reached about 40 demonstration and protests in Egypt's towns and villages during less than six months from June 2007 till

⁰ The researcher obtained this figure from Egyptian newspaper during the mentioned period, as well as civil society organizations' reports.

¹ *Al-Masri al-Yawm* newspaper, issue 1119 dated 7/7/2007

² *Human Development Report* (National Planning Institute: Cairo, 2005) page 195.

³ *Human Development Report* (National Planning Institute: Cairo, 2005) page 195.

⁴ Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation, *Main Aspects of the 2017 Water Policy*, January 2000.

⁵ Specialized National Councils, 23rd session, 2001/2002.

January 2008. These protests were characterized by spreading throughout many of Egypt's towns and villages in Upper Egypt, or in the north, particularly the Kafr al-Shaikh Governorate. The protest movements are also characterized by continuity as they have not stopped since they were first sparked in June 2007 until the writing of this paper.

FORMS OF RESISTING THE PHENOMENON OF THIRST

The water-related protest movement is characterized by diverse forms of resistance forms which ranged between the use of violence, on the one hand, and resorting to peaceful forms, on the other. Within this context, following are examples of some of these forms:

With relation to the use of violence as a form of protest

This was took place in blocking one of the coastal roads in the city of Burullus, Kafr al-Shaikh province, in the north of Egypt, one of the locations that suffered the most thirst. Protestors blocked the international coastal road in the province in the first week of July 2007. This demonstration took place when the Kafr al-Shaikh Drinking Water Holding Company, within the framework of its new policy aiming to retrieving costs and making profits by depriving Burullus of drinking water in order to deliver it to investors in the Baltim summer vacation city near the city of Burullus. Hamdin Sabbahi, People's Assembly member for the city of Burullus, had warned against this in 2004 when he pointed out that the drinking water company services discriminated against the Burullos and Hamul areas' citizens as the water goes to the Baltim summer resort while farmers and fishermen in the villages of Burullus and Hamul in the Kafr al-Shaikh province are deprived of it.⁶

In general, the use of violence as a form of resisting thirst in Egypt is not a main feature in the context of studying drinking water protest movements as there were no more than four violent protests within the movement.

PEACEFUL RESISTANCE OF THE THIRST PHENOMENON

Peaceful resistance was the main characteristic of resisting the thirst phenomenon in Egypt, ranging between sit-ins, strikes and addressing officials through complaints.

Peaceful demonstrations during the period under study amounted to 36 protests ranging between demonstrations and sit-ins. For example, residents of the Damento village, Mahalla al-Kubra Center, the population of which is over 30,000 organized a demonstration on 26 June 2007 in front of the Gharbiyya Province headquarters in objection to the village being deprived of drinking water for a number of weeks thus forcing residents to buy water daily at the rate of LE2 per jerry can, which imposed a major financial burden on them. Gathered village residents affirmed that they sent numerous complaints to those in charge of drinking water and sanitary drainage in the province, Mahalla al-Kubra city and center heads but there was no response.⁷

Within the same context, more than 3,000 citizens of the Bashbish village, Mahalla al-Kubra center, started a sit-in on 9 July 2009 objecting to the lack of water for prolonged periods. They broke up the sit-in only when the Gharbiyya governor ran three large container cars, 10 cubic meters each, carrying drinking water to cover the citizens' water needs as a temporary solution. The governor promised permanent solution in the future.⁸

⁶ People's Assembly 5th session transcript, 21/11/2004, page 76.

⁷ *Al-Masri al-Yawm*, issue 1110 on 28/6/2007.

⁸ *Health and Environment Forum*, Health and Environment Development Association, issue 11.

In the southern province of Bani Swaif the citizens of the village of Mazura, Samasta center, objected to the scarcity of drinking water in the Gabal Gharbi (western mountain) area. They raised banners with the phrase: "**We are thirsty in the land of the Nile!**"

The second trend of peaceful resistance against the problems people face in Egypt particularly that of drinking water is linked to complaints addressed, by those suffering from the lack of water or its poor quality, to the Ministry of Irrigation and the Drinking Water Facility, in addition to some other entities, such as the media, particularly print media.

Unfortunately, there is not list of the large number of complaints in Egypt, although they represent a main feature of resistance that people resort to in the face of the violations they are subjected to with relation to drinking water. For example, the residents of some villages of the Sidi Salam center, Kafr el-Shaikh province has been suffering for 30 years from the lack of water despite hundreds of complaints they sent to officials in the province, the Cairo Drinking Water Facility and other entities.⁹

Also among the cases of resorting to complaints, a number of the residents of the Wardan village, a village that is deprived of drinking water located on the Rashid branch of the Nile with a population of 80,000, tried unsuccessfully to address a number of official authorities. The water they have access to is not suitable for human or animal consumption as it contains numerous pollutants, as its mineral content concentrations are higher than the allowed limits. One of the village lawyers pointed out the problems they face to document the extreme drinking water pollution because official authorities in charge of the water situation in the village refuse to acknowledge the problem. Attempts to analyze the water in one of the official laboratories they were discouraged by the price per sample which exceeds LE1,500, an amount beyond the means of the village residents. An analysis conducted after a number of residents collected donations showed the water unfit for human use. A complaint was submitted accompanied by the water sample analysis report. Again, there was no response from the authorities which forced the villagers to establish a local committee based on volunteer efforts to defend their rights to clean drinking water.

One surprising violation is the one that befell some citizens for having complained. Security forces arrested a number of the citizens of the Mit Ya'ish, Mi'at Ghamr center in the northern province of Daqahliya after the imam of one of the village mosques called upon residents to stop drinking the highly contaminated water. The residents had also sent numerous complaints to officials about the water. Following the Imam's call upon the village residents to stop drinking the water, security forces arrested him and those who allowed him to speak. A Christian citizen was also arrested. Instead of investigation the residents' complaint about water contamination, those arrested were charged with sectarian incitement on the grounds that they were Christians and Muslims.

The third form of peaceful resistance is represented in resorting to litigation before courts. Despite the importance of this mechanism, it is still emerging and relatively weak.

REASONS BEHIND ESCALATING PROTEST MOVEMENTS: STATE TREND TOWARDS PRIVATIZING THE DRINKING WATER FACILITY AND THE COST RECOVERY PRINCIPLE

⁹ *Health and Environment Forum*, Health and Environment Development Association, issue 11.

Egyptian government officials repeatedly make declarations saying that drinking water would not be privatized, etc. Reality, however, witnessed strong efforts towards privatizing drinking water in Egypt.

The way for privatizing the drinking water sector was first paved by some studies conducted by Specialized National Councils. The studies expressed the need for specialized drinking water and sanitary drainage companies in each province or a number of neighboring provinces. The study divided Greater Cairo and Alexandria utilities among a number of companies to create competition and provide each company with independence to set policies, and the economic management that would cover operational and maintenance costs and make suitable profits,¹⁰ due to unifying the drinking water institutional management framework represented in a number of public authorities and utilities.

Another study also pointed out the need for an economic management based on the operational and maintenance cost recovery principle in addition to making sufficient profits in order to provide complete access to drinking water by 2017.¹¹ This was affirmed by the Specialized National Councils study which recommended establishing private companies the management of which would be independent of the state with the need to make a suitable surplus profit for shareholders in order to encourage citizens to investment in this field.¹²

The same study also recommended modifying the price per cubic meter of water according to the abilities of each province. The study added that companies should make available free sources of clean water (taps) in poor neighborhoods while local authorities bill the companies only for the cost of water.¹³

To echo these ideas and visions, the first steps in that direction started in 1994 which witnessed Presidential Decree 95 approving the principle of economic authorities rather than public ones. According to this decree the Cairo Governorate General Authority for Drinking Water and Sanitary Drainage Utility was established. Also in accordance with this decree most of the legal principles included in the articles of Decree 197 of 1981 establishing the National Authority for Drinking Water and Drainage were repealed.¹⁴ In accordance with this policy, this was followed by Presidential Decree 281 of 1995 which resulted in transforming the General Authority for Drinking Water and Drainage in some governorates to economic authorities.¹⁵

The second shift toward privations took place in 2004 with Presidential Decree 135 establishing the Drinking Water and Sanitary Drainage Holding Company. In accordance with this decree the economic authorities in 14 of Egypt's 28 governorates were transformed into holding companies. The remaining governorates followed gradually until 2007.

The Housing Minister was authorized to enforce the provisions of the Public Enterprise Sector Companies Law and its Executive Regulations to these companies. In accordance with this decree, the companies' economic performance was no longer under the control and supervision of the People's Assembly. Only the boards of directors, formed every

¹⁰ *The Economic Management of the Water and Sanitary Drainage Facility*, National Council for Services and Social Development, session 17, 1997, page 372, 379.

¹¹ Make drinking water and sanitary drainage services available to everyone, the National Council for Social Services, session 18, 1997/1998, page 444.

¹² The economic management of the Water and Sanitary Drainage Facility, page 381

¹³ The economic management of the Water and Sanitary Drainage Facility, previous reference, page 382.

¹⁴ Decree 197 of 1981, *Official Gazette*, issue 17 on 23/4/1981.

¹⁵ *Official Gazette*, issue 37 on 14/9/1995.

three years by a General Assembly in turn formed by the Housing Minister, has authority over the companies' boards of directors.

Although the previously mentioned Presidential Decree restricted itself to transforming the Drinking Water and Drainage Authority to a holding company, the following year (2005) Housing Ministerial Decree 14 was issued conceiving the type of such companies through directing them within the framework of privatization by establishing affiliate and other joint stock companies where they participate with another holding company or with legal persons or public or private individuals. Holding companies also have the right to make all actions that would help achieve all or some of its purposes.

Holding companies may also increase the capital of existing affiliate companies, liquidate, merge or divide them, in addition to buying the shares of companies traded on the stock market. The matter does not stop at merging previous public companies into other private companies. The decree also prescribes the need to restructure affiliate companies through all means that guarantee economic efficiency and expanding the ownership base with the aim of raising the efficiency of these companies' work.

Within the context of emphasizing the principle of privatization, this decree did not stop at that but article 1 went on to emphasize another principle synonymous with the privatization process which is to the principle of rendering water a commodity. Article 1 stipulates that "the purpose of the company is to purify, desalinate, transport, distribute and sell drinking water." This means buying and selling water with the aim of making profit, a principle absent from Egyptian law organizing water's institutional framework throughout different historical period till 2005 with the issuing of this decree.

BREACHING THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUAL ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER

At a time when Egypt suffers from water scarcity, some sovereign entities, such as the Irrigation Ministry, granted a Canadian petrochemicals company 105 million cubic meters of clean water for only LE3 million per year, the equivalent of about US\$550,000¹⁶, at a time when many Egyptians in some villages and cities suffer from water scarcity, such as 20,000 people in the `Ubur area in the city of Isma`iliyya who are no further than 500 meter away from the governor's office. They have been suffering from the absence of drinking water for about 20 years.¹⁷ About 40,000 of the citizens of the hamlets of al-But and Isa in Damiatta resorted to using contaminated canal water to bathe and for household use because they have suffered thirst for 12 years due the repeated water shortages. Children from the South Sinai city of Abu-Rudīs suffered from skin disease because they didn't shower due to water scarcity. A citizen attributed the water shortage crisis to summer resorts saying: "Rich people on summer vacation must drink clean water while the poor can't find a glass of water."¹⁸

Inequality between people does not stop at that but extends to drinking water quality. Within this context a study issued by the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) points out that when talking about the quality of the drinking water sector there is a slightly different view compared to other economic sectors. The fact that people are connected to a public drinking water network does not mean in many cases that the families necessarily have a private source of water, particularly in Egypt's rural areas.¹⁹ Thus, if we look at the relative distribution of the degree to which houses are linked to

¹⁶ *Al-Badil* newspaper, issue 273 19/4/2008.

¹⁷ *Al-Masri al-Yawm* newspaper, issue 1125, 13/7/2007.

¹⁸ *Al-Masri al-Yawm* newspaper, issue 1125, 13/7/2007.

¹⁹ Report on the view of society toward involvement in development infrastructure services based on the social contract survey in Egypt, 2005, IDSC, April 2007.

the Water Utility according to economic divisions, according to the field study of the 2005 Social Contract in Egypt National Survey, we find that 62.2% of the poorest 20% of the population have taps in their homes while 30.5% are not linked to any water utility, while 98.3% of the richest 20% of the population have taps in their homes. The issue is not restricted to inequality in water access but privatization leaning impact extends to increasing prices related to obtaining drinking water compared to income levels in Egypt.

Within this context, Chairman of the Housing, Public Utilities and Reconstruction Committee Muhammad Muhammad Abu al-`Aynain points out that since 1996 the water price was unified in all governorates at 12 piasters per cubic meter. However, after Presidential Decree 135 of 2004 was issued to gather all units working in the drinking water sector under the umbrella of the holding company, this company, for economic reasons, wished to re evaluate the price of this service which led them to raise the price to 23 piasters per cubic meter, the prevalent price in all governorates.²⁰ The Housing Committee Chairman pointed out that the real price of water exceeds the current price which ranges between 60 and 100 piaster²¹ at a time when the Water Holding Company chairman affirms that customers pay 23 piaster per cubic meter when it costs the company 80 piasters. The difference between the two prices is borne by the government as a subsidy. This means that the government pays 67 piasters to subsidize water for both the needy poor and the non-needy.²²

Within another context, an Egyptian People's Assembly member points out that there no unified water pricing policy in Egypt. He gave the Alexandria governorate as an example where citizens pay LE10 per month aside from actual consumption.²³

The amount of 23 piasters is collected per cubic meter in Greater Cairo. However, viewing a sample of consumption invoices from the governorates of Cairo, Giza and Kalioubiya showed that the total invoice is no less than LE9 to LE10 although the value of water consumption may not exceed LE4. The difference between the total invoice value and water consumption is due to additional items, such as fees for delivery, resource development, meter maintenance, etc.

Thus, any talk about a value of 23 piasters per cubic meter is unrealistic. Dividing the total invoice value on the consumption value shows that the average cubic meter price is no less than 60 piasters (based on a sample of some water consumption invoices from the Greater Cairo governorates).

Within the same context, modifying the invoice payment system from three to two to one month places more burdens on citizens who bear fees and taxes that may reach LE5 per month instead of paying them once every three months. This caused a People's Assembly member to point out that water prices have increased to reach 130% and that the monthly payment system poses additional burdens of fees and taxes on citizens.²⁴

It doesn't stop at that with relation to pricing drinking water. It extends to more conflict in the water pricing policy and the means of collecting the value of drinking water consumption through incomprehensible means. People's Assembly member Muhammaed `Abd ul-Aziz Sha`ban points out that the talk about unified water prices is untrue. Shaaban submitted to the Housing Committee the invoice of a lady who receives a social security pension of LE50 while her water bill reached LE51.65. This means she

²⁰ People's Assembly 7th session transcript, 22/11/2004, page 7.

²¹ Previous reference, page 8.

²² Al-Ahram newspaper, issue 44056, 21/7/2007.

²³ People's Assembly 7th session transcript, previous reference, page 11.

²⁴ People's Assembly 7th session transcript, 22/11/2004, page 14.

had to pay her full pension and beg the remaining amount. He mentioned another bill for the months of August and September 2004 valued at LE257, and another house's bill that amounted to LE993 for water consumption during the months of August and September of the same year.²⁵

THE ABSENCE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF DRINKING WATER RESOURCES

The conversion of Egypt's General Drinking Water Facility Authority into a holding company was accompanied by Presidential Decree 136 of 2004 establishing the Drinking Water, Sanitary Drainage and Consumer Protection Regulation Organization to have a legal personality and report directly to the Minister of Housing.

The decision affirms the principle of drinking water privatization through referring to the role of the organization based on regulation, following-up and monitoring everything related to drinking water and drainage all over Egypt, whether those performed by government projects, those that the government grants concessions to work in this field in accordance with the law, or drinking water units established by private projects in a way that enables and encourages such projects to achieve the highest level of performance to ensure the sustainability of quality and efficient service.

This decree only gives the appearance of attempting to involve citizens through emphasizing the role of consumers and their right to know their rights and obligations, as well as acquainting them with the nature of the role played by the organization within the framework of full transparency.

However, reality shows otherwise. The beneficiary public or those dealing with the drinking water companies do not participate. The Minister of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities restricted himself to appointing a member who represents consumers on the organization's board of directors, at the time when the Housing Minister heads it, in addition to the membership of the organization's executive director and the chairman of the National Authority for Drinking Water and Sanitation, as well as two members representing the Drinking Water and Sanitary Drainage Sector, and representatives from the ministries of Finance, Health and the Environment to be nominated by the concerned minister.²⁶

It is clear from previous administrative formation the primacy of the bureaucratic aspect and the absence of any citizen participation in managing this organization. Participation was restricted to one single person who is supposed to represent consumers among the organization's 11 board members all of whom come from various ministries and represent various administrative bodies. Thus, it is clear that priority is given to representing administrative and executive entities in exchange for one person to be chosen by the Housing Minister although according to stipulations this organization is supposed to consider consumer complaints to guarantee a balance between the interests of water companies and consumers and seek to limit potential conflicts between them, a question poses itself here: does the administrative structure of the Drinking Water and Consumer Protection organization guarantee the required balance? Or can it help bring about any real participation?

This is the absence of any institutional structures that guarantee the implementation of the principle of involving citizens in control over drinking water companies whether with relation to the required quality of drinking water and obliging the companies to adhere

²⁵ Previous reference, page 12.

²⁶ *Official Gazette*, issue 18, continued from 29/4/2004.

to acknowledged international criteria and specifications, or with relation to availability and pricing.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN ADDRESSING THE DRINKING WATER PROBLEM

Despite the presence of millions in Egypt who suffer from the lack of safe drinking water, or those who have intermittent access throughout the year, there are not civil movements that defend the right of people to access water. Moreover, there are no organized forms that can help people with the problems and most efforts are spontaneous and individual.

This wide public of beneficiaries is very different in cultural and economic aspects. It has no organizational framework in its relation with drinking water companies. Part of this public falls under differing ideological and intellectual currents, as some belong to the ruling National Democratic Party, others belong to liberal or leftist current, in addition to civil organizations, etc., while the vast majority do not belong to any forms of organization.

At the same time, there are no civil organizations with a strong interface with the drinking beneficiary public or even with the groups unable to access drinking water services. The majority of these associations, such as the Consumer Protection Association, for example, raise awareness rather than actually address any violations that beneficiaries could suffer from with relation to drinking water company services or inability to access drinking water, in addition to the absence of a clear strategy among civil society organizations to address the problem.

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