



Cleaning up Tahrir Square on February 12, 2011.

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# Taking Out the Trash

## Youth Clean Up Egypt After Mubarak

Jessica Winegar

**O**n February 12, 2011, thousands of Egyptians flooded Tahrir Square to celebrate the previous night's ouster of Hosni Mubarak, their country's dictator of 30 years. It was an unusually bright and clear-skied Cairo Saturday, full of promise of a new Egypt. From atop the October 6 bridge that spans the 'Abd al-Mun'im Riyad portion of Tahrir, where just nine days earlier government-paid attackers had rained down ammunition upon pro-democracy demonstrators in the most brutal battle of the revolution, one could see dozens of crews of young people cleaning the square.

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Many of the middle-class youth wore surgical masks and gloves as they swept the streets of their thick layer of dust and pushed into piles the chunks of pavement that had broken under the weight of army tanks as well as the hammering of protesters making projectiles for self-defense. With large black plastic bags brought from home or purchased by largely youth-led NGOs, they collected food and drink containers, old newspapers, empty cigarette packages and other remnants of the tent city sit-in. Other volunteers washed off or painted over the spontaneous graffiti that protesters had written on buildings, sidewalks and bridges. Toward the end of the afternoon, human chains formed to protect the curbs that were

receiving a fresh coat of paint. Hundreds of young people had turned out for what was called “Tahrir Beautification Day.” And in the coming weeks, one could regularly see youthful cleaning brigades all around Cairo picking up trash, painting curbs, and adorning light posts and tree trunks with the colors of the Egyptian flag.

What does it mean that the day after Egyptians accomplished one of the most amazing feats of modern history, the most prominent scene at the epicenter of the struggle was one of earnest, vigorous cleaning? Of course, Tahrir had been strewn with debris during the 18 days of protest, despite the protesters’ valiant and heavily photographed efforts to tidy up as they went. But there was something more to this diligent scrubbing and sweeping.

## Cleaning Urban Space

During the Mubarak years, the amount of litter on the streets of Cairo increased exponentially, a development lamented not only by tourists and in the Western press, but also by citizens who had to live amidst the mounds of trash. There were several reasons for this trash pile-up, most having to do with the intensification of neoliberal policies, especially in the areas of urban development and waste management. The implementation of structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s on the heels of President Anwar al-Sadat’s shift toward a free-market economy sucked capital out of rural areas and concentrated it in the hands of city elites. Massive labor migration accompanied the economic opening, contributing to a population surge in Cairo such that the greater metropolitan area was home to approximately 17 million by the end of Mubarak’s tenure. Densely populated informal settlements sprung up all over Cairo. By and large, the government managed the urban development and housing needs of low-income migrants poorly—in many cases ignoring them entirely. The government was slow to provide these new communities with adequate public services, whether clean water or trash collection.

The Sadat and Mubarak governments’ economic policies were at the root of the garbage problem in another way. The number and variety of mass-produced consumer goods grew at astonishing rates after the neoliberal economic “reforms” announced in 1990 and 1996, and especially after the National Democratic Party’s intense liberalization push of 2004. Soon Egyptians were eating elaborately packaged snacks and fast-food meals made by big companies instead of food made at home or at corner eateries whose takeout meals were usually wrapped in newsprint or other reused paper.

The problem was compounded when, starting in 2000, the government privatized its sectors responsible for waste collection and staged an “industrial takeover” of the *zabbalin*, the independent workers who had gathered garbage from many doorsteps in Cairo (as well as Alexandria, Egypt’s second largest city) since the 1940s. Several European companies were

given contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars, and substantial tax breaks, to come in and replace these systems. The process was encouraged by USAID, which supplied technical assistance and billed privatization as necessary to sustain urban hygiene and attract investment. The garbage workers complained about these companies’ meager pay, lack of health insurance, illegal dumping near residential areas and low recycling rates (the *zabbalin* had traditionally recycled 80 percent of trash).

What most Cairenes began to notice, with their noses as well as their eyes, was the buildup of trash in the streets. By 2004, and especially by the end of the Mubarak era, it became clear that this new “system” was not an improvement, but a step backward in dealing with the 10,000 tons of rubbish produced every day in the city. Citizens, especially but not exclusively in lower and middle-income areas, complained of extremely erratic service as they now faced a new garbage tax that the government tacked onto skyrocketing electricity bills (regardless of income or property value). Much of the equipment imported by the foreign companies would not fit down the narrow streets of the informal settlements, so trash bins were placed in central areas of the neighborhood. Company executives and government elites complained that Cairenes were too “lazy” to take their trash to the dumpsters, without considering the expectations of customers who had enjoyed the convenient door-to-door service of the *zabbalin* or local mores that might make people feel unrespectable carrying trash down the street in front of their neighbors. Disgruntled Cairenes argued that these companies, like the government system that preceded it, did not provide an adequate number of containers in the public areas. It did not help that customs sat on some of the necessary equipment for months, or that urban redistricting resulted in fights between governorates over who would pay the garbage bill. Some governorates delayed payment or paid less than the contracted amount to penalize the companies for their poor service. The companies, in turn, shifted the burden to their employees and withheld their pay. As workers struck, garbage piled up more and more.<sup>1</sup> And then, in a colossal mistake, the government culled the *zabbalins’* herd of swill-eating pigs in response to the swine flu scare of 2009. The Christian *zabbalin* understood this move as a sectarian attack on their livelihood (given the institutionalized discrimination against Christians during the Mubarak years) and refused to pick up organic waste. All of these developments added a singular stench and a multitude of flies to the summers of the 2000s, the hottest on record in Egypt.

When the battalions of youth cleaned up Tahrir Square and other neighborhoods, they were expressing their desire for a city cleared of refuse. The physical cleanup was highly symbolic of the larger drive to “purify” the Egyptian government, ridding it of the kind of mismanagement, discrimination and corruption that characterized the sanitation crisis. Indeed, the Tahrir demonstrations of April 8 were called “the Friday of purification” (*gum‘at al-tahrir*).



A teen garbage collector in Muqattam.

Q. SAKAMAKI/REDUX

## Reclaiming Public Space

As Egyptians cleaned, they were also reclaiming their public space from decades of neglect by the Mubarak regime. As the 1990s and 2000s wore on, Cairenes griped not only about the trash, but also about the filth and disrepair of public spaces such as squares, parks, bus stops, government offices and schools. As state welfare policy shifted its focus from the poor to the rich, urban space became extremely segregated and militarized. Many with the means moved out of what they viewed as the “chaos” of mixed- or lower-class areas of Cairo into gated communities or other secluded areas with private security systems. They shopped in exclusive malls and stores, and attended private schools, all of which restricted entry on the basis of class. Meanwhile, the rest of the city’s residents were left with a public transportation system bursting at the seams, crowded and dilapidated government hospitals and schools, and decrepit parks thirsty for the water that was siphoned off for the new golf courses and lawns of the rich. And when they went out in public, they were always in danger of arbitrary harassment, arrest, detention and torture by the corrupt police forces or state security, sometimes at the behest of upper-class Egyptians threatened by any transgression of the social hierarchy, real

or perceived. In the Mubarak years, most Cairenes had little to no urban space that was well maintained and that they could enjoy unthreatened.

Thus when the youth came out in groups to paint curbs, bridges, murals, signposts and tree trunks, they were reclaiming that public space as their own. Even though the 30-year old emergency law preventing gatherings was still in effect, the revolution enabled them to break it without fear of the security forces. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, they could work, laugh and play together in public space without an overwhelming sense of state surveillance or upper-class disgust. They were trying to reverse, and reject, the neglect of the Mubarak government by taking the repair and beautification of the city into their own hands. Many cleaners whom I interviewed spoke of treating plazas and avenues as they would their “own home,” even stating that these places are “our home” (meaning the home of Egyptians).

And while the ruling elite and their cronies had sneered that Egyptians were by nature indolent and disorganized, and thus not ready for democracy, the ranks of young cleaners were showing, through their very painting and polishing, that they were energetic and efficient. They were thus demonstrating that they deserved and were capable of democracy—that they, contrary to the claims of the government and

many upper-class Egyptians, had the wherewithal to build a society through grassroots, democratic means. They presented themselves as clean, well-behaved citizens, not dirty threats to the social order. On February 12, many members of the cleaning crews wore photocopied Arabic-English signs on their backs that captured the mannered civic pride: “Sorry for disturbance. We build Egypt.”

## Window Dressing?

It is clear that the burst of beautification immediately following the removal of Mubarak was both literal and metaphorical. It was an attempt to reverse decades of neglect, corruption and failure in waste management, and in urban public space generally, that revealed itself not only in the form of piles of trash, crumbling buildings and peeling paint, but also in the threatening and policed segregation of urban space.

At the same time, however, the intense focus on cleaning could reproduce the logics of power that led to the revolution in the first place. The Mubarak government had long relied on window dressing, building major public works such as fancy libraries and museums with spectacular opening ceremonies that were partly intended to give the appearance of a state that cared for its citizens. They often fell into disrepair because the

underlying problems of malfeasance and mismanagement were not solved.

Will all of the cleaning of Tahrir be for naught if the roots of the problem—the concentration of capital in Cairo, the political economy of commodity production and waste management, the channeling of public funds into corporate welfare—go unaddressed? Will the beautification serve as a cover for economic problems much as the Mubarak regime’s famous projects did? Furthermore, does the youths’ concentration on neatness and order—while wearing surgical masks and gloves—represent a middle-class disdain for dirt, a ranking of appearances above substance, thereby entrenching the biases of the elites who reigned in the Mubarak era? There is no doubt that poor people like cleanliness and beauty, and that some of the middle-class cleaners in Tahrir that day went on to work to establish a decent minimum wage or reform the legal system. But the question remains as to whether the priority placed on cleaning the streets will remove the garbage of the Mubarak era or merely recycle it. ■

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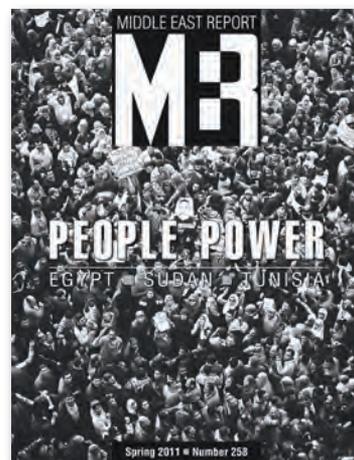
### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent overview of the waste management issue, see Rachel Leven, “The Pharaoh’s Garbage: Growth and Change in Egypt’s Waste Management System,” *NIMEP Insights* 2 (2006).

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