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# Bureaucrats, Peasants and the Dominant Coalition: An Egyptian Case Study

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# Bureaucrats, Peasants and the Dominant Coalition: An Egyptian Case Study

by Richard H. Adams, Jr.\*

*This article challenges the thesis that local-level bureaucrats need be part of any 'dominant coalition' at the village level. Based on a case study of Egyptian agricultural officials, the paper argues that local bureaucrats may well be more useless than dominant in any political or economic sense. In rural areas in which local officials lack the resources (supplies, funds) to do their jobs, they may well be quite inconsequential. In such situations their position as 'public servants' may be appropriated by members of the rich peasantry, who have no particular need to work closely with resource-poor local government staff.*

In recent years much attention has come to focus on the so-called 'forgotten men' of development:<sup>1</sup> the local-level bureaucrats charged with implementing national strategies of rural change at the village level. Such attention is long overdue. In many Third World countries local government administrators – agricultural officials, health agents and teachers – bear the brunt of the daily responsibility for improving the character of rural life.

Given the importance of local bureaucrats, it is rather disturbing to note that many studies have argued that such officials tend to be biased towards the wealthier members of the village community. According to these studies, local bureaucrats and rich peasants tend to work together in order to monopolise the flow of government resources to the village. Myrdal, for example, writes that '[local] officials administering development programmes require the cooperation of local elites [if they are to achieve successful results]. No wonder, then, that [the programs they administer] have helped mainly those in the rural population who were already relatively well off [1968: 293]. Carrying this theme one step further, Thoden van Velzen argues that local officials and rich peasants are so closely allied that they 'form a dominant coalition, excluding the mass of peasantry from a variety of privileges' [1976: 247].

This article proposes to join the small number of studies [e.g. *van Donge, 1982*] questioning such a paradigm of bureaucratic-rich peasant collusion. It is based on research conducted on agricultural officials in *markaz* (district)

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'El-Diblah' in Egypt (Minya Governorate)' during the period 1978–80. In this rural area there was no dominant *coalition* of bureaucrats and rich peasants: there was only a dominant *group* of rich peasants. In *markaz* El-Diblah a small number of rich farmers so controlled village economic and political life that they had no need to coalesce with local agricultural officials. Agricultural officials working in the area generally had so few economic and material resources at their disposal that they had extremely little to offer to anyone.

In *markaz* El-Diblah relations between bureaucrats and rich peasants were far too diffuse to fit into any overly simplified 'dominant coalition' model. Because of their lack of resources, agricultural officials in the area tended to be more useless than dominant, and more vegetative than productive in any developmental sense of the word. It is true that, in one or two cases, these officials did work closely with rich peasants. But just as many rich peasants ignored the local agricultural staff, and in several instances relations between the two sets of actors were quite strained. Furthermore, many rich peasants chose to maintain their closest relations with members of the poor peasantry. On the whole, socio-political relations in *markaz* El-Diblah tended to revolve more around the patron–client ties that rich peasants maintained with members of the poor peasantry than around the ties that they kept with members of the local agricultural staff.

This article elaborates upon these themes and is divided into three parts. Part I tries to relate the findings of the local-level study to a larger and more meaningful context by examining the whole notion of a 'dominant coalition'. In this section ideas from social and political anthropology are used to pinpoint the factors favouring the existence of such a coalition in different rural settings. Part II then attempts to apply these more general principles to analysing the interaction between the three main sets of actors in *markaz* El-Diblah: agricultural officials, rich peasants and poor peasants. In this section the lack of resources at the disposal of agricultural bureaucrats is used to explain the absence of any dominant coalition in *markaz* El-Diblah. Part III summarises the basic conclusions of the study.

## I. TOWARDS A MODEL OF THE DOMINANT COALITION

In the literature the notion of a dominant coalition of local bureaucrats and rich peasants is quite widespread. For example, Chambers, drawing on the basis of years of experience in Africa, writes that '[local] officials, as is notorious and has been documented *ad nauseum*, are locked into relationships with the rural elite. This is especially marked with agricultural extension, but can also apply to other arms of government' [1977: 4].

Given the force of such views, it becomes important to inquire into the reasons for the lack of such a coalition in our particular study area in Egypt. This inquiry can begin by hypothesising about some of the more general factors affecting the existence of a dominant coalition in various social settings. While such hypothesising can proceed on the basis of previous local-level studies, it must remain rather speculative until much more is known about the nature of bureaucratic-rich peasant ties in a wider range of

areas. The purpose of our hypothesising is thus more to stimulate discussion than to define it.

In the most general terms, it would appear that six different 'conditions' need to be satisfied if a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants is to exist. Three of these conditions pertain to the local government staff: (1) local bureaucrats need to be separated (by office, salary) from the rest of the population; (2) local officials must have enough externally-provided resources (supplies, funds) to work with; and (3) local bureaucrats have to have some personal control over the allocation of these resources. The other three conditions pertain to the rural elite, and include: (4) there must be a scarcity of resources (land, economic) in the area; (5) these resources should be distributed unequally, with the elite controlling a disproportionate share; and (6) there should be some type of implicit or explicit state policy favouring the rural elite.

These six conditions are themselves dependent on a wide variety of social, political and institutional factors. It is therefore important to examine each of the conditions at greater length.

#### *Local Bureaucrats and the Dominant Coalition*

The condition that local bureaucrats need to be separated from the rest of the rural population might seem obvious, but it is still necessary. If perchance, bureaucrats working at the local level were still in the feudal employment of patrimonial rulers, it would be quite difficult to speak of a coalition of bureaucrats and elite, since the two would, in fact, be one. Such a separation of bureaucrats from the rest of society also follows the patterns of bureaucratic development set by Weber. According to Weber [1978], the distinguishing features of modern bureaucracy include: the separation of office from home; the appointment of officials on the basis of expertise and knowledge; and the substitution of salary from prebendal remuneration (the right to collect taxes on lands and estates).

In most developing countries local bureaucrats are, in fact, quite removed from the rest of the population. Leonard [1977], for example, argues that on the basis of their education and salaries, local agricultural officials in Kenya represent a 'privileged group'. In Kenya such bureaucrats tend to enjoy regular monthly incomes that exceed those of all but the wealthiest farmers.

The favoured educational and financial status of local bureaucrats often encourages them to develop attitudes of superiority towards the local population. Thoden van Velzen [1976], for example, notes that local bureaucrats in Tanzania are quite reluctant to associate with members of the rural population. Such attitudes may provide the best social explanation for the formation of close bureaucratic-rich peasant ties at village level. Stationed as they are in remote and oftentimes alien locales local bureaucrats may well 'seek out' the rich peasantry, since they look upon them as their social and intellectual 'equals'.

The second condition for the existence of a dominant coalition is that local bureaucrats must be provided with the resources – supplies, funds – needed to discharge their duties. Such resources *may* be used to develop the local community, but they *must* be used in a manner so as to attract the 'attention'

of local parties (for example, the rural elite). In most developing countries such resources will have to be provided by outside sources, at either the national or the international level. As Bratton has rightly noted, in most instances 'the flow of development resources, such as it is, is predominantly from [the] center to [the] locality' [1980: 8]. Local bureaucrats (and communities) have the power to change, but not to initiate, the flow of such resources.

Both the volume and the timing of such centre-to-periphery resource flows are crucial. If local agricultural officials are to represent an important force in the village community, they must, for example, be provided with sufficient seeds, fertiliser and credit to present to farmers prior to planting. If they do not command such resources, their presence may well become more superfluous than useful.'

This point suggests that there may well exist a type of 'differentiation of power' among government officials working at the village level. Bureaucrats working for well-supplied local-level institutions may be able to command far more authority than their colleagues who are employed by under-capitalised institutions. In any particular village situation, it would be quite difficult to determine in any a priori way which set of bureaucrats (and institutions) are important or dominant, and which are not. This would depend on a wide range of factors, such as the basic government strategy of development (urban or rural-oriented) and the role assigned to different institutions in pursuing that strategy. Some village institutions may be assigned the task of extracting local resources (through taxation), while others may be responsible for extending local-level resources (through education).

The third condition for the existence of a dominant coalition is that local bureaucrats must have some personal control over the resources placed at their disposal. They cannot be mere bureaucratic functionaries, responsible for allocating resources solely on the basis of the type of 'impersonal rules and procedures' elaborated by Weber [1978: 959]. Rather, local bureaucrats must be able to use their own knowledge and discretion to influence the allocation of resources.

If local bureaucrats are granted such discretionary powers, some observers believe that it is inevitable that they will use such powers to benefit the rural elite. Blair, for example, writes that the more power placed in the hands of the local officials,

... the greater the chance for misallocation of [funds] to people who will use them less efficiently, i.e. the rural rich. It is the larger farmers who have relatives in government, for few sons of marginal farmers or landless farmers obtain enough education to qualify for government positions [1978: 73].

#### *Rich Peasants and the Dominant Coalition*

The fourth condition for the existence of a dominant coalition is that there must be a scarcity of resources – land, economic – within the local community. In an atmosphere of plenty, there would be no particular need for

local officials to coalesce with the rich peasantry. In such a situation they could conspire with members of almost any social group – rich or otherwise – in order to monopolise government resources. This seems to be the case with many reported instances of bureaucratic malfeasance in the industrialised countries.

Yet in most developing countries the local village community is characterised by limited material resources. Such communities also tend to lack the productive means needed to expand their resource base. It is this scarcity of local-level means and resources that leads many Third World governments to undertake ambitious rural development programmes.

The fifth condition for the dominant coalition is that local resources need to be distributed unequally. Such a pattern of resource distribution gives the rural elite power and leverage over local officials. According to Thoden van Velzen, 'the economic position of the [rich peasantry] upholds the dominant coalition. Their power base ... gives them preferential access to official positions' [1976:241].

In many developing countries the scarce and unequal distribution of resources often gives rise to a characteristic social relationship at the village level: the patron-client relationship. The dynamics of this relationship are quite simple. Through their dominant control over local land resources, rich peasants can act as patrons to poorer villagers by supplying them with such services as land access, credit and employment opportunities. In return, poorer villagers can provide their patrons with information, obedience and a firm basis of local support.

Through their local-level patronage powers, rich peasants can often decisively affect the outcome of village development projects. Government officials must therefore learn how to curry favour with the rural elite. They must learn how to work in and through the patron-client structures maintained at the local level by the rural elite.

The final condition for the existence of a dominant coalition is the existence of some type of implicit government policy favouring the rural elite. In most developing country situations this condition is easily satisfied.

In many African and Asian countries the central government has neither the ideological commitment nor the institutional apparatus to impose its policy objectives on the village. It must therefore rely to some extent on the rural elite for policy implementation at the local level. The rich peasantry may or may not share the development objectives of the state. But so long as the rich peasantry does not seriously obstruct the pursuit of state objectives, the central government is likely to at least tacitly support their existence. In those cases in which the state is worried about rural unrest, it may even choose to use its resources to 'buy' the active support of the rich peasantry. In any event, a national policy of favouring the rural elite easily translates at the local level into what Wertheim has called a policy of 'betting on the strong' [1964]. Anxious to please their superiors, government bureaucrats at the village level spend most of their time working with the rich peasantry, since they ostensibly represent the 'strongest' and 'most progressive' members of the village community.

## II. MARKAZ EL-DIBLAH AND THE DOMINANT COALITION

The preceding discussion helps set the more general framework for examining the factors explaining the absence of a dominant coalition of local bureaucrats and rich peasants in our particular rural site. After a brief overview of the basic socio-economic features in *markaz* El-Diblah, this section will examine bureaucratic-rich peasant ties in terms of the six 'conditions' elaborated above.

*Markaz El-Diblah*

Located along the Nile River in Upper Egypt,<sup>1</sup> *markaz* El-Diblah is a rural administrative area embracing some 155,000 residents. These rural inhabitants live in some 30 villages, small, dusty communities which are linked together by a rudimentary network of narrow, unpaved roads. The largest community, and the administrative seat for the area, is the village of El-Diblah. In El-Diblah, as in all of the other outlying villages of the *markaz*, simple one- and two-storey mud-brick houses predominate.

Three main sets of actors exist in *markaz* El-Diblah: *muwazzafin* (sing. *muwazzaf*), local-level government bureaucrats who have earned a high school, or more rarely, a college degree; rich peasants, who own or rent over ten feddans of land;<sup>2</sup> and poor *fellahin* (sing. *fellah*), peasants who are either landless or own less than one feddan of land.

Poor *fellahin* represent the single largest social group in the El-Diblah district. According to Table 1, peasants holding less than one feddan of land constitute approximately 40 per cent of the total landholding peasantry in El-Diblah (as is also the case in Egypt as a whole). Substantial as this figure is, it does not even include the large number of landless peasants in the district.

The approximately 1,400 *muwazzafin* in *markaz* El-Diblah work in one or another of the welter of government institutions – agricultural cooperatives, health clinics, schools, village councils – that have been created in the area since the Egyptian Revolution of 1952. The 450 or so rich peasants grow the most lucrative cash crops planted in the area: sugarcane, grapes and vegetables. To cultivate these crops, the rich peasantry hires workers from among the ranks of the large pool of poor *fellahin* in the area. The latter survive by working as agricultural labourers, cultivating the principal cash crops (in addition to the above, cotton) and food crops (wheat, maize, clover) grown in the area. They grow these crops by largely traditional means: the *fa's* (hoe), the *tunbur* (Archimedian screw) and the animal-driven *baladi* plough.

It is possible to examine the relations between local bureaucrats, rich peasants and poor peasants in the El-Diblah district by examining the Egyptian government's main instrument for directing agricultural change at the local level: the agricultural cooperatives. There are presently about 5,000 agricultural cooperatives in rural Egypt – 130 land reclamation cooperatives, 650 land-reform cooperatives and about 4,200 multi-purpose agricultural cooperatives.

<sup>1</sup> A feddan equals 1.038 or 0.42 hectares.

TABLE I  
DISTRIBUTION OF LANDHOLDINGS IN MARKAZ EL-DIBLAH AND EGYPT, 1975 AND 1979

Size of Holdings (Feddans)	Markaz El-Diblah, 1979				Egypt, 1975			
	Number of Holdings	Percent	Area of Holdings (Feddans)	Percent	Number of Holdings	Percent	Area of Holdings (Feddans)	Percent
Near-landless (under 1)	7,334	41.0	2,922	9.7	1,124,300	39.4	739,000	12.4
Small peasants (1-3)	7,353	41.1	9,489	31.5	1,160,100	40.7	2,023,400	33.8
Middle peasants (3-10)	2,737	15.3	10,122	33.6	503,300	17.6	2,130,000	35.6
Rich peasants (over 10)	466	2.6	7,591	25.2	65,200	2.3	1,091,300	18.2
T O T A L	17,890	100.0	30,124	100.0	2,852,900	100.0	5,983,700	100.0

Source: Markaz El-Diblah data obtained from the district agricultural headquarters in the markaz and include the landholdings of members of all 29 agricultural cooperatives in the markaz. Egypt figures from A.R.E. Ministry of Agriculture and cited in Harik, *Distribution of Land, Employment and Income in Rural Egypt* [1979: 39].

Twenty-nine of these agricultural cooperatives are located in markaz El-Diblah. Like their institutional counterparts in other rural areas, these cooperatives are responsible for providing farmers with their primary agricultural inputs: seeds, fertiliser and pesticide. They collect payment on these inputs by deducting from the imputed value of those cash crops – principally cotton in El-Diblah<sup>10</sup> – which farmers are required by law to market through cooperative channels. By controlling the flow of inputs and outputs to farmers, the cooperatives in El-Diblah, as in rural Egypt as a whole, represent a subtle mechanism for taxing the agricultural surplus produced by peasant farmers.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Local Bureaucrats in El-Diblah District*

'Mut' cooperative is one of the largest of the 29 agricultural cooperatives in El-Diblah district. Set on the banks of a muddy irrigation canal in a small, outlying village of the same name, Mut cooperative consists of three weathered buildings: a one-storey administrative building, a dilapidated warehouse and a garage. A total of 15 government bureaucrats and eight manual labourers work at this cooperative, which supervises the administration of some 2,300 feddans of land.

The fifteen government officials at Mut cooperative seem to fulfil the first condition favouring the existence of a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants, namely, that of being separate from the rest of the peasant population. On the basis of both their salaries and their education, the bureaucrats at Mut cooperative represent a privileged rural group.

In Mut, as in other rural Egyptian areas, government salaries may be quite low – averaging between LE 20 and LE 50 (US \$28 and \$71) per month – but at least they are steady and dependable. Rich peasants in Mut growing such cash crops as sugarcane and vegetables may well be able to net incomes ranging from LE 300 to LE 500 (US \$430 to \$715) per month. But these are clearly exceptions. Average net incomes for most small landowning peasants in the area do not exceed LE 45 (US \$64) per month, and those of landless peasants are, of course, much lower. During the period 1978–79 landless peasants working as agricultural labourers in the El-Diblah district could only expect to earn LE 12 (US \$17) per month.

In the Egyptian countryside local-level bureaucrats are appointed to their positions on the basis of educational achievement, not technical know-how. Thirteen of the 15 bureaucrats at Mut cooperative are therefore in their early to mid-twenties, recent graduates of the local agricultural high school in the village of El-Diblah. In virtually every case they are 'local boys made good': the first high-school graduates from families born and raised in the area.

In the El-Diblah district where the vast majority of the rural population is still illiterate," the educational achievements of local officials encourage them to feel quite superior to most villagers. For example, most of the bureaucrats at Mut cooperative believe that their high school education entitles them to membership in a rural elite that is exempt from manual labour. While their own fathers and brothers may still toil long hours out in the fields, these bureaucrats sincerely believe that it would be *'aib* (lit. shameful) for them to work with their hands in the fields. According to one of them:

How could I ever work in the fields like a mere *fellah*? What would my family and friends ever say? I would never hear the end of their laughter.

The contempt that the typical Egyptian *muwazzaf* feels towards manual labour, and those who do it, serves greatly to constrain the effectiveness of the bureaucrats in Mut cooperative. In theory, the bureaucrats at Mut cooperative are supposed to spend most of their time out in the fields, making sure that the peasants in their areas are receiving the necessary inputs (seeds, fertilisers), and that they are growing the proper crops. Yet in practice, the bureaucrats actually spend very little of their time out in the fields. Given their disdain for the *fellahin*, the bureaucrats in Mut cooperative spend only about three months working out in the fields: two months in the summer, supervising efforts to protect the young cotton crop from pests," and one month in the winter, making annual tallies of the crops grown in their areas. During the rest of the year, the typical bureaucrat in Mut cooperative reports to work at 9 a.m., signs in on the government register, spends an hour or so filling out government forms, and then leaves for the day.

In Mut, as in the El-Diblah district as a whole, there is the sense that a government bureaucrat is doing his job if he files enough paperwork with the local district agricultural station. In Mut, forms on the levels of

inputs, cropping patterns and the amount of land planted in cotton therefore abound. But given the reluctance of the government bureaucrats to spend much time out in the fields, many of these completed forms bear only a hazy relationship to reality. In Mut the high level of form consciousness coupled with the low level of field work mean that cooperative officials actually do very little to promote agricultural development in the area. In the words of one *fellah*:

The [cooperative] *muwazzafin* here do nothing at all, except fill out various government forms on us. If the government was to send them all home tomorrow, all we would need would be our seeds and fertiliser. And, God willing, we would always be able to buy these inputs on the black market.<sup>11</sup>

This comment points to the absence of the second condition for the existence of a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants, namely, the lack of resources at the command of local bureaucrats. In the district of El-Diblah officials attached to the agricultural cooperatives lack both the supplies and the expertise to attract the 'attention' of local parties (for example, the rural elite). They are thus more superfluous than dominant in terms of the local power structure.

The lack of resources at the disposal of local agricultural officials is at least partly a function of Egyptian state policy. From the standpoint of the regime in power, the primary purpose of cooperative officials in a place like El-Diblah is that of control, of making sure that peasant farmers grow and harvest those cash crops (for example, cotton) that are marketed through government channels. Cooperative officials in the El-Diblah district thus spend more of their time overseeing the actions of local peasants than they do in trying to provide these peasants with the supplies needed to increase their productivity.

In order to ensure that farmers plant cotton and other cash crops, the state does distribute some agricultural inputs – seeds, fertiliser and credit – to farmers. At the local level, these inputs are typically distributed through the medium of the cooperative bureaucrats.

For instance, the cooperative bureaucrats in the El-Diblah district dispense chemical fertiliser to farmers on the basis of the crop and the area to be sown. While these fertiliser allotments are usually adequate for some crops (cotton, wheat), they are generally quite inadequate for others (maize, sugarcane). This means that a flourishing black market for chemical fertiliser exists in the El-Diblah district. In general this market is fuelled by poor *fellahin*, who are anxious to earn quick cash by selling their cooperative-supplied fertiliser to rich peasants. But it is also fuelled by the corrupt behaviour of administering officials, who siphon off fertiliser supplies for sale at higher black market prices. As we shall see, such siphoning activities usually occur *without* the collusion of the rich peasantry.

In cooperation with the local village banks,<sup>12</sup> cooperative officials in the El-Diblah district also oversee the flow of agricultural credit to farmers. In El-Diblah these cooperative officials extend credit in cash and in kind for the cultivation of only a limited number of cash crops: cotton, sugarcane and

fruit. Such restrictive credit practices serve indirectly to bolster the local powers of the rich peasantry at the expense of those of the cooperative bureaucrats. In the absence of any government credit for cultivating the main food crops grown in the area (maize, wheat), poor *fellahin* must still frequently turn to the wealthier village elements for aid. For example, a small farmer wishing to plant wheat in November may well have to turn to a village moneylender in order to secure the requisite working capital. Practices such as these suggest that the bureaucrats attached to the agricultural cooperatives have only partially, and not completely, assumed the money-lending functions of the rich peasantry.

In the El-Diblah district the power and authority of the cooperative bureaucrats is further compromised by the fact that they are generally quite ignorant about agriculture. The officials in Mut cooperative, for example, may well have completed high school, but they know extremely little about such basic agricultural matters as crop cultivation, the correct application of fertilisers and the optimal planting densities for various crops.<sup>16</sup>

This lack of practical agricultural knowledge serves greatly to undermine the utility of cooperative officials at the local level. In Mut cooperative it is significant that a clear majority of farmers interviewed said that if they wanted advice on a new agricultural input, they would seek help from a relative or a neighbour, rather than a cooperative bureaucrat. In the words of one disgruntled peasant:

The cooperative *muwazzafin* are not here to teach us anything useful. How could you expect them to know anything about agriculture in the first place? Very few of the *muwazzafin* have any actual farming experience. Many of them are too young [i.e. 20 to 30 years old] to own land outright. If they are landowners, they always have a relative farm it for them.

Given such a state of affairs, it is not surprising that no agricultural extension services are available at Mut cooperative. There are, in fact, no extension agents even stationed at Mut cooperative. In the whole district of El-Diblah there are only seven extension agents to serve some 28,000 peasants. Since all of these extension agents are stationed in the district agricultural station in the village of El-Diblah, they seldom put in an appearance at Mut.

The third condition for the existence of a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants is that local officials must have some personal control over the resources placed at their disposal by the state. Local bureaucrats must be able to use their knowledge and discretion to 'direct' the allocation of resources to the rich peasantry.

In the El-Diblah district cooperative bureaucrats exercise a good deal of personal control over the relatively limited resources – seeds, fertiliser and credit – placed at their disposal. While in theory they are supposed to allocate these resources on the basis of cropping pattern and mix, in practice they distribute many of the items as they see fit.

According to some writers [e.g. *Blair, 1978*], local officials should use such discretionary powers to benefit the rural elite. However, in the El-

Diblah district cooperative officials tend to use their powers to help themselves – and not the rich peasantry – to state resources. In this area administrative malfeasance is based on expediency: the ability to move public resources quickly and quietly into someone's private pocket. *Muwazzafin*, who are familiar with the daily intricacies of government operation, are thus well placed to pilfer or steal government resources without the assistance of outside groups. They are able to siphon off 'bits and pieces' of the state without teaming up with any members of the peasantry – rich or poor.

For example, each agricultural cooperative in Egypt has a head warehouseman who is responsible for accepting the delivery of government-supplied seeds, fertiliser and pesticide, and for distributing these goods to the *fellahin*. In at least two of the five cooperatives studied by the author in the El-Diblah district, the head warehousemen were well-known thieves. They would accept the government deliveries, and then either shortchange the peasants or else steal part of the stock for sale on the black market. In some cases they did this with the assistance of the *mudir* (bureaucratic head) of the cooperative, since his help was needed to alter the government books. In other cases they did it with the aid of other bureaucrats working in the cooperative.

Despite such examples, there is a lingering sense among many villagers in the district of El-Diblah that the rich peasantry is able to put enough pressure on cooperative bureaucrats so as to enjoy a disproportionate share of the 'spoils' of administrative malfeasance. Yet in reality, only one or two cases of corruption involving bureaucratic-rich peasant collusion are apparent.

One of these cases involves the supply of tractors to peasant farmers. In rural Egypt the agricultural cooperative system is supposed to supply farmers with rental access to mechanised tractors for use in various ploughing, tilling and harvesting functions. However, in El-Diblah, because of a shortage of financial resources and trained mechanics,<sup>1</sup> most agricultural cooperatives are fortunate to have even one operating tractor. For example, three of the five cooperatives studied by the author in the district had no operating tractor. In the other two cooperatives rich farmers were the only ones able to gain access to the sole operating tractor. According to one small peasant, 'it is a well-known fact here that only certain rich farmers can rent the cooperative tractor. No one else has the connections within the cooperative to reserve the tractor.'

This case does present a picture of rich peasants working in and through cooperative officials in order to monopolise access to a scarce and valuable resource (that is, tractors). However, it is exceptional. In many more instances, the cooperative officials in the El-Diblah district do not control enough resources to warrant the close attention of the rich peasantry. It is true that some members of the village elite rely on cooperative officials for the supply of their seeds, fertiliser and credit. Yet given the continual short supply of such goods, just as many wealthy peasants choose to bypass the cooperative system entirely, and to procure their supplies on the black market. On the whole, cooperative officials in the El-Diblah district are more superfluous than dominant in any power sense of the word. Most of

them could have been removed and the only change would have been that the local coffee shops would have suffered a decline in business.<sup>12</sup>

*Rich Peasants in El-Diblah District*

*Markaz* El-Diblah clearly meets the fourth condition for the existence of a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants, namely, it is an area of considerable resource scarcity. In El-Diblah the most important resource is land, and the 30,000 feddans of land in the district must support some 28,000 peasants. As the numbers indicate, there is simply not enough of this resource to go around. Many of the peasants in *markaz* El-Diblah – an estimated 40 per cent of the *male* agricultural work force – are, in fact, landless. They are therefore forced to sell their labour power to others in order to survive.

Land resources in El-Diblah are also distributed unequally, thus fulfilling the fifth condition for a dominant coalition. In 1979 the Gini coefficient of inequality in landholdings in the district was 0.528.<sup>13</sup> In that year rich peasants (access to over ten feddans) represented less than 3.0 per cent of the total number of landholders in the *markaz*, and possessed about 25.0 per cent of the cultivated land (Table 1). At the other end of the spectrum, near-landless *fellahin* (access to less than one feddan) represented 41.0 per cent of the total number of landholders in the area, but yet controlled less than 10 per cent of the total cultivated land.

According to the literature [e.g. *Thoden van Velzen, 1976*], such a pattern of resource distribution should give rise to a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants by giving the latter power and leverage over the former. Yet in the El-Diblah district such a coalition does not exist. By virtue of their landholdings, rich peasants do possess considerable local-level powers. But they do not typically choose to wield such powers over local bureaucrats, who generally have very little to offer.

In the district of El-Diblah the scarce and unequal distribution of land resources does, however, sustain another type of social relationship: the patron-client relationship. In this area the large pool of landless and near-landless peasants means that there is always a strong demand for a wide variety of patronage services: agricultural work opportunities, consumer loans and brokerage services with the government.

In El-Diblah much of the inconsequentiality of local bureaucrats (and institutions) stems from their inability to supply such patronage services to poor peasants. For example, in this area a landless peasant in search of agricultural work or credit cannot turn to his agricultural cooperative, because such institutions neither hire farm workers nor extend credit to those who lack land collateral. The government bureaucrats attached to these cooperatives also lack the means to provide such patronage services to poor peasants. In El-Diblah, as in rural Egypt as a whole, bureaucratic salaries at all levels of government service tend to be so low that, unless he owns land or a small business on the side, the typical bureaucrat is not in an economic position to hire workers or to extend credit.

All this means that poor *fellahin* in the El-Diblah district who are in need of patronage services do not turn to government institutions or govern-

ment bureaucrats. Rather they turn to rich peasants. It is therefore these wealthier village elements – and not government bureaucrats – who continue to be most consequential at the local level. According to one informed observer:

The *muwazzafin* in *markaz* El-Diblah tend to come from the smaller, poorer families. Neither they nor the institutions [that they work for] can meet all the daily needs of the poor peasants. The latter, therefore, continue to depend on the rich peasantry.

In the village of El-Diblah poor *fellahin* are dependent on a group of 40 rich peasants. All of these rich peasant-patrons own over ten feddans of land, and a few of them own over 50 feddans. While quite comfortable by modern-day standards, these rich peasants are nowhere near as wealthy as their pre-1952 predecessors,<sup>20</sup> who often owned in excess of 100 feddans of land. In El-Diblah, as well as other Egyptian rural areas, the process of land fragmentation – propelled by the cumulative effects of Egyptian land reform, population growth and the absence of a rule of primogeniture in Islam – has whittled down even the largest estates. This means that while rich peasants in El-Diblah still provide an important range of patronage services to poor peasants, they no longer possess the monopoly of resources needed to support poor *fellahin* on a permanent basis.

An important shift in the character of patron-client relations has therefore occurred in the village of El-Diblah. While the patron-client paradigm may call for each client to have only one intermediate patron at the same time [Moore, 1977: 258] – patron monogamy – in the village of El-Diblah patron monogamy has given way to patron polygamy. The much diminished resources of rural patrons in El-Diblah, and elsewhere, means that poor *fellahin* clients must now circulate between several different patrons in order to survive. Commenting on this changed set of circumstances, one rich peasant declared:

Before 1960 I used to have the same agricultural workers working for me year after year. Now, however, my estate is smaller, my labour requirements are less and opportunities for work have opened in other Arab countries. As a result, most of my workers only work for me a few weeks at a time, and then go elsewhere. Sometimes they reappear later in the year, sometimes not.

It is important to recognise that the changed character of patron-client relations in El-Diblah is more the consequence of demographic and economic factors than it is the outcome of any conscious state action. The high rate of population growth on a limited land base,<sup>21</sup> the division of estates upon inheritance and the opening of employment opportunities abroad<sup>22</sup> have all done more to transform rural patron-client relations than any action by state or local officials.

The sixth and final condition for the existence of a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants is the presence of some type of implicit or explicit government policy favouring the rural elite. Such a policy

orientation is needed at the national level to provide local-level officials with the 'encouragement' to ally themselves with the rich peasantry.

Since the revolution of 1952 the Egyptian state has implicitly favoured the rich peasantry. The political reasons for this are clear. The military officers who seized power in Egypt in 1952 had one overriding objective in the countryside: the elimination of the aristocracy allied with the *ancien régime*. Once that objective had been achieved (through land reform), the state adopted a generally conservative position *vis-à-vis* the countryside. On the one hand, the Egyptian state lacked both the ideology and the organisational apparatus needed to mobilise the mass of the peasantry.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the state needed to develop a rural ally that was capable of containing the emergence of potentially hostile elements. Such considerations led the state to turn for support to the new rural elite (those owning over ten feddans) that emerged in the Egyptian countryside after land reform. While it never serviced the political or economic interests of this new rural elite in any direct way, the state did allow it tacitly to oversee much of what it undertook in the countryside.

In *markaz* El-Diblah rich peasants oversee state activities in one of two ways: either directly, by serving in important local-level institutions themselves; or indirectly, by seeing to it that their trusted poor peasant clients get elected to less critical village posts. In El-Diblah there is an element of intermediation in many village institutions. Rich peasants may, for example, decide that a particular institution does not control enough resources to warrant their personal attention or service. They may then decide to have one of their poor peasant clients serve in their stead. Since the dynamics of this indirect service reveal more of the character of bureaucratic-rich peasant ties, it is useful to see how such service affects the activities of the popularly-elected boards of the agricultural cooperatives.

Anxious to increase the involvement of the local peasantry, the Egyptian government in the early 1960s devised a two-tiered institutional structure for the cooperatives, consisting of government-appointed bureaucrats and a locally-elected board of *fellahin*. The latter was supposed to supervise the flow of government-supplied seeds, fertiliser and credit to cooperative members. By law (Law 51 of 1969) the government required that a majority of the *fellahin* elected to cooperative boards be peasants owning less than five feddans of land. During the period 1978-79, about 70 per cent of the board members in the five agricultural cooperatives studied by the author in the El-Diblah district met this requirement.

Yet it is crucial to recognise that by formally providing for the selection of a majority of small landowners to these cooperative boards, the Egyptian government is *not* in effect providing for the free 'election' of a group of independently-minded *fellahin*. Rather it is providing for the 'appointment' of a group of poor peasants who are either obsequious clients or indigent relatives of rich peasants. The small peasants elected to cooperative boards in El-Diblah generally own such minuscule plots of land that they are either economically vulnerable (in the form of wage labour and loans) or materially vulnerable (in the form of bribes) to rich peasants.

For instance, the agricultural cooperative board in the village of Mut

consists of 12 members. Nine of these 12 *fellahin* own less than five feddans of land, and *all* of them are either relatives or poor peasant clients of 'Anwar', the largest landowner in the community. A few years ago Anwar's accession to the post of '*umdaship* (village head)'<sup>34</sup> forced him to relinquish his position as head of the cooperative board.<sup>35</sup> Anwar promptly had his leading 'henchman' in the village 'elected' to replace him. This henchman, a poor peasant who owns less than two feddans of land, soon began pressuring the bureaucratic head of Mut cooperative to give Anwar extra supplies of fertiliser and pesticide. When the bureaucratic head refused, Anwar had his henchman file an official complaint calling for the head's dismissal, on the grounds that 'he neglected the interests of the *fellahin*'. At the same time Anwar let it be known that he expected all cooperative board members to sign this complaint. This was easily accomplished since, according to villagers, 'Anwar controls the village and all that moves within it'. Although some cooperative board members later privately acknowledged that they 'had no idea what they signed', they knew all too well that Anwar controlled the wage labour market in the village, as well as the illegal distribution of cooperative monies among board members.<sup>36</sup>

This example reveals yet another reason for the absence of a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants in the district of El-Diblah. Rich peasants in this area have no pressing need to work closely with local cooperative officials, since they can indirectly influence or control the activities of such officials through the medium of their trusted poor peasant clients. At present, rich peasants in El-Diblah prefer this indirect system of control, since the resources at the command of the cooperative *muwazzafin* are relatively limited. If, however, the resources of these bureaucrats were to increase dramatically, it is likely that members of the village elite would choose to work much more closely with them. Then, and only then, would it be possible to speak of a bureaucratic-rich peasant coalition in the agricultural cooperatives in the El-Diblah district.

### III. CONCLUSION

Table 2 summarises the findings of this study in terms of the six 'conditions' which are seen as necessary for the existence of a dominant coalition of local bureaucrats and rich peasants. A quick glance at the table reveals that five of the six conditions are satisfied in our study in the district of El-Diblah in rural Egypt. But one of the most important conditions – that relating to the provision of sufficient resources to local bureaucrats – is not. It is this lack of externally-provided resources to local officials that serves to undermine the presence of any bureaucratic-rich peasant coalition in the agricultural cooperatives in the El-Diblah district. In this area local cooperative officials tend to be so resource-poor that rich peasants see no particular need to seek them out. In the words of one of the largest landowners in El-Diblah:

The [agricultural] cooperatives here are a failure, because the *muwazzafin* [who man them] do nothing except collect their salaries. The seeds and fertiliser they give us we could always get elsewhere.

TABLE 2  
 CONDITIONS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF A DOMINANT COALITION OF LOCAL  
 BUREAUCRATS AND RICH PEASANTS

Condition	Description of Condition	Condition Satisfied in <i>markaz</i> (district) El-Diblah
Condition 1	Local bureaucrats need to be separated (by office, salary) from rest of population	Yes
Condition 2	Local bureaucrats must have enough externally-provided resources (supplies, funds) to work with	No
Condition 3	Local bureaucrats have to have some personal control over the allocation of these resources	Yes
Condition 4	There must be a scarcity of resources (land, economic) in the area	Yes
Condition 5	These resources (land, economic) should be distributed unequally, with the elite controlling a disproportionate share	Yes
Condition 6	There should be some type of implicit or explicit state policy favouring the rural elite	Yes

And the advice they give us comes from two or three years of book training. So what good are they to us?

Lacking resources and expertise, cooperative bureaucrats in the district of El-Diblah are more useless than dominant, and more vegetative than productive. In most rural matters they must defer to the rich peasantry, who continue to represent the *only* members of any dominant social group in the area. These rich peasants possess the land and the economic resources needed to provide patronage services – agricultural employment, credit and brokerage services – to the large number of poor peasants in the area. They therefore represent the only true ‘insiders’ in El-Diblah. The bureaucrats attached to the agricultural cooperatives may also hail from the local community, but they represent only a type of second- or third-order ‘insider’, people whose jobs and duties bear no particular relevance to the realities of everyday economic life in the *markaz*.

These findings serve to underscore the great diversity of relations which are possible between social actors at the local village level. At one extreme, perhaps, lies our ‘model’ of a rich peasantry-dominated rural periphery. At another extreme lies Thoden van Velzen’s paradigm [1976] of a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants. In between these two extremes no doubt lie a veritable plethora of other types of social relations between local bureaucrats, rich peasants and poor peasants.

What is now needed is more field research into the various social, political and institutional factors affecting relations between bureaucrats and peasants in different rural settings. Such research may well have a very practical output, namely, that of improving the ability of government officials to work in, around and through various local power structures in order to implement national programmes of rural change. In this era of declining rural economies in Africa and elsewhere, more attention needs to be focused on ensuring that local bureaucrats have sufficient resources, and that these resources are effectively reaching those in greatest need.

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#### NOTES

1. The term 'forgotten men' is from Chambers [1966].
2. *Markaz* (district) El-Diblah is a pseudonym, as are the names of all villages and villagers in this study. The names of governorates are real.
3. Minya Governorate is located approximately 250 kilometres south of Cairo. Like all governorates in Egypt, Minya Governorate is divided into a number of *markazes* (districts), one of which is *markaz* El-Diblah.
4. This list of six 'conditions' is by no means intended to be exhaustive or definitive. Other writers may well be able to distinguish other equally valid 'conditions' for the existence of a dominant coalition of bureaucrats and rich peasants.
5. For more on these points, see Weber [1978: 957-94].
6. See, for example, van Donge [1982].
7. For an instructive study of an instance in which the state did have the ideology and the commitment to try to impose its objectives on the rural periphery, see Schurmann [1968].
8. Since the time of the pharaohs, Egypt has been divided into two broad geographical areas: Upper and Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt now generally refers to the area located upstream the Nile River from Cairo, that is, the area south of Cairo. Lower Egypt or the Delta refers to the region north of Cairo.
9. Since the Egyptian government does not keep statistics on the incidence of rural landlessness, the number of landless peasants must be estimated as a residual of the total male agricultural work force. Population and landholding data gathered by the author in *markaz* El-Diblah suggest that approximately 40 per cent of the total *male* agricultural work force in the area is landless, and another 24 per cent is near-landless. For more information on these calculations, see Adams [1985b: 6, 5].
10. Cotton is the most important export crop grown in Egypt. During the period 1978-80 cotton and cotton textile exports accounted for between 13 and 16 per cent of the total annual value of Egyptian commodity exports [Schoie, 1981: 15].
11. For a good analysis of the taxation powers of the agricultural cooperative system in Egypt, see Cuddihy [1980].
12. According to the 1976 Egyptian population census, 71 per cent of the population in Minya Governorate is illiterate. In the rural district of El-Diblah, this figure probably approaches 80 per cent.
13. In Egypt continuous cropping under constant irrigation provides ideal conditions for the development of the cotton leaf worm. Hence, during the summer months the national government oversees a major effort designed to reduce the incidence of this, and other, cotton pests. During these months cooperative *muwazzatm* supervise large gangs of village children, who are paid to walk huddled over amidst the young cotton crop, carefully picking off the larvae of the dreaded cotton worm.
14. For a similar reaction by a villager that is recorded in the leftist Egyptian journal *al-Tah'a*, see Waterbury [1978: 8].
15. In 1977 the Egyptian government created a network of village banks that is designed to extend agricultural credit to 'worthy' farmers. These banks are, however, still closely

linked with the agricultural cooperatives. The village banks extend loans in cash and in kind on the basis of cooperative-supplied data on land ownership and cropping patterns.

16. The lack of practical training given to agricultural officials in developing countries is often cited as an important factor inhibiting the effective operation of small farmer extension programmes. See, for example, Lele [1975].
17. In 1972 the average capital base of the agricultural cooperatives in Egypt as a whole was only LE 1,580 (US \$2,260), far too low to support either the purchase or the maintenance of tractors and other mechanised inputs. Moreover, in recent years many trained tractor mechanics and repairmen in Egypt have gone to work abroad in the oil-exporting countries of Saudi Arabia and Iraq. See Adams [1985b].
18. For a similar conclusion regarding the role of local bureaucrats in Zambia, see van Donge [1982: 102].
19. Scaled to lie between 0 (perfect equality) and 1 (perfect inequality), the Gini coefficient is an index commonly used to measure the inequality of a distribution of income. It can be represented as:

$$G = 1 + \frac{1}{H} - \frac{2}{HY} \sum_1^H p(h)y^h$$

where:

H = number of units

$y^h$  = quantity over which inequality is measured

Y = total inequality

$p(h)$  = rank assigned to household  $h$  ranked by  $y$

20. Shortly after the revolution of 1952, the Egyptian government passed a series of land-reform measures designed to reduce the landholdings of the rural aristocracy. The first land-reform act (Law 18 of 1952) set the maximum limit on land ownership at 200 feddans for a single person and 300 feddans for a single family. These limits were later reduced to 50 feddans for a single person and 100 feddans for a single family. As a result of these laws, about 12.5 per cent of the total cultivated land in Egypt was redistributed to about 9 per cent of the total 1970 rural population [Fadl, 1975: 10].
21. Between 1950-54 and 1976-80 the cropped area, which equals the cultivated area multiplied by the cropping intensity, increased by 18.5 per cent in Egypt. During the same time period, the total Egyptian population increased by 85.9 per cent.
22. According to official government sources, the number of Egyptians working abroad increased from 34,000 in 1973 to approximately three million in 1984.
23. Some writers have claimed that the Egyptian government did make a brief abortive attempt to mobilise the peasantry in the mid-1960s. See, for example, Harik [1974] and Binder [1978].
24. In many smaller Egyptian villages, the national government appoints 'umdus (village headmen) to maintain law and order at the local level. These 'umdus are usually chosen from among the largest landowners in the village. For a detailed description of the historical evolution of the duties of an 'umda, see Baer [1969].
25. By Egyptian law 'umdus (village headmen) are barred from serving on agricultural cooperative boards.
26. According to village informants, cooperative board members in Mut who support Anwar during the year receive a 'gift' of LE 15 to LE 30 (US \$21 to 42) at the end of the year. This money comes from profits accruing to the cooperative from such activities as the rental of agricultural machinery and the sale of seeds and pesticides.

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