

# Female Violence during the Egyptian Legislative Elections 2005

## Egyptian Women *Baltajiya*

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The 2005 Egyptian Legislative Elections turned out to be a beneficial time for the *baltajiya* (bouncers in Egyptian dialect). The *baltajiya* is a group of muscular men or women hired by candidates to attend electoral rallies and support them. They are also hired to beat up and harass opponents and their supporters.

The trend of spending lavishly on votes is espoused by wealthy candidates (described as electoral bribery), and has contributed to the expansion of the *baltajiya* phenomenon. Profits are fast and generous. A *baltaji*'s salary varies from 300 to 500 Egyptian pounds on a single election day, which is equivalent to the monthly salary of some employees.

During the period when local newspapers were conducting what they termed "scientific research", the bribery rate was estimated at 5 billion Egyptian pounds (around \$820 million). Local newspapers and websites, such as the "Electronic Opposition Movement", unearthed some details about how these *baltajiya* are paid to 'defeat' an opponent, or to collect overdue fees and cheques from supporters.

What is of particular interest is that the majority of these gangs are usually led by divorced women who had suffered at the hands of their former husbands, or who had been

exploited in their former jobs. Their experiences have apparently led them to vow revenge on men by working as *baltajiya* and *foutouwa*. Some authors, however, consider this to be a misrepresentation of the *foutouwa* concept, which is commonly mentioned in Egyptian literature, including Nagib Mahfouz's novels. It is based on the idea of someone securing the rights of the marginalized in return for money. Recently, this concept has been replaced with the appalling notion of the *baltaji*.

### The Origin of the Word *Baltaji*

The word *baltaji* has become popular and entered common usage in Egypt since the beginning of the elections more than 40 years ago. The nature of their work is to violently prevent other candidates' supporters from voting. Sami Farad, author of the Farad Dictionary of Egyptian Slang and Rural Expressions for Industries and Artisans, states that the word *baltaji* is of Turkish origin, with its roots in the word "*balata*", that is, that which cuts down or the instrument used to cut down trees. During Ottoman rule, the *baltajiya* soldiers led the conquering forces who used to break through the fortress walls of enemy cities.

He added that, "The word *baltaji* didn't have negative connotations; people were named after them such as the

*baltaji* Moustafa Bacha, who was the ruler of Egypt from 1752-1755 before the end of Turkish rule. Also, during the era of Mohammed Ali, the Egyptian ruler, the *baltajiya* forces existed in the army. But in the first half of the 20th century, the word *baltaji* acquired a negative connotation, referring to a reckless and dangerous person. This new meaning lasted until later in the century, before an end was put to the work of *baltajiya*s and their frightening tactics. The word was no longer a synonym for criminal."

### **Najlaa Al Luxe and the Bacha**

Mohammad Al Sayed, editor of the "*Hamassouna*" website, claims that a group of *baltajiya* was hired to beat up on Muslim Brothers' supporters in one of the local elections. The Brothers had given Mr. Al Sayed a tape recording of a conversation between drunken *baltajiya* accidentally recorded in Port Said at the end of election day. Unknowingly, the *baltajiya* had confessed important details about their employment and remuneration for the election day attack on the Brothers. The conversation was as follows:

- "- How many are you?
- We are a big group and Najlaa El Luxe is with us.
- Who is Najlaa El Luxe?
- *Bacha*, is there anyone who doesn't know Najlaa El Luxe?
- How much did you earn for what you did; because we heard that you mugged the Brothers!
- 200 Egyptian pounds each, but Najlaa El Lux took 500, and she received it from the Bacha himself (the Secretary-General of the party) who said she had a vital role to play in the elections.
- So Najlaa took more than you did?
- Yes, but we were humiliated and told off. People attacked us. Some of us were even sent to the hospital.
- Who paid the fees?
- We threatened the ones who hired us, and the *Bacha* had to go pay the Al Souleiman hospital fees in person."<sup>1</sup>

Wael Abbas, editor of "Electronic Awareness", alleges that there are a lot of pictures and video tapes showing money exchanges and agreements between the *baltajiya*, governing party candidates and their representatives, in addition to scenes of ruthless women molesting young girls, especially those of the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, there are pictures of the vehicles transporting the sword-bearing *baltajiya*, showing them deliberately breaking laws. Many of these images were published in the local press.

This phenomenon is not confined to Najlaa El Luxe in Port Saiid, but has spread to many other areas and now includes the majority of regions in Egypt. Very quickly, the *baltajis* have become a card in the electoral season. They are chosen based on specific criteria, especially their ability to ensure quick service. They are paid between 30 to 100 Egyptian pounds (\$5 to \$16), with rates sometimes reaching 700 Egyptian pounds (\$100).

Mohammad Al Sayed, quotes M. Adel, a member of the Brotherhood in Cairo, saying that there was no reaction from the Brothers following the *baltajiya* attack which took place in the first phase of the elections. "However, during the subsequent period, the Brotherhood decided to defend itself. The idea was to form 'prevention groups' within each candidate's camp, enabling them to face the *baltajiya* without the use of weapons."<sup>2</sup> This reinforces what the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood had said to the local press, accusing the *baltajiya* of the role they played in the campaign, and claiming that the Brothers were merely protecting themselves.

However, the problem many young Muslim Brotherhood members face in the conservative rural provinces is dealing with the dangerous female *baltajiya* who harass female relatives by pulling off their veils and verbally abusing them.

### **Mrs. Shar Al Tareek**

Mrs. Shar Al Tareek, as she is nicknamed by her supporters, is considered to be the most famous *baltajiya* in Al Jiyara area in Cairo. Her real name is Kaydahom, and she denies working as a *baltajiya* for unworthy causes. She justifies her occupation by saying, "Our job is to secure people's rights. The client looks to us to defend him. For example, if a con-man gives him a bounced cheque, he hires us to make sure he's refunded. This is why our work is so important."<sup>3</sup>

When talking about practicing *baltaja* or *foutouwa* as a profession, Shar Al Tareek, who is a simple woman, says, "Men are unjust with me, upon seeing me they say I'm a bad woman. I once married a man who was unemployed and who divorced me a few days later because I bit him. Since then, I pledged to take revenge on all men."<sup>4</sup> She later said that she has found in the *foutouwa* what she needed; it provides her with her only means of living since she has no one to pay her bills. Nevertheless, she did not deny rendering her services for free at times.

### **Saksaka and Majanes: The Law into Their Own Hands**

Be cautious if you come across a Saksaka on the road. Woe unto the one who falls victim to "The Wild Saksaka", as her supporters call her. She, like Shar al Tareek, says, "Our job is limited to chastising the unjust, so we are a court that judges and follows through with its verdicts in a short period of time instead of procrastinating like the normal courts. A person may ask us to punish a neighbor who does not respect their customs, or causes constant harm to them. Or, we are asked to take revenge on a husband who tortures his wife for no apparent reason."<sup>5</sup>

According to various sources, there is also another *baltajiya* by the name of Majanes Al Dahel, who was alleged-

ly imprisoned because of a fight that ended in death. Majanes Al Dahel is a *baltajiya* for a good cause and that is why she abides by the "League of *Baltajiya's*" official price list for its services, in addition to special prices for mass requests:

- Dispraise: 800 Egyptian pounds
- Dispraise and rudeness: 1600 Egyptian pounds
- Enormous scandal: 3000 Egyptian pounds
- Normal scandal: 250 Egyptian pounds
- Disgrace: 500 Egyptian pounds
- Hit with an axe: 400 Egyptian pounds

Naphthalene *Baliyeh*, another famous *baltajiya*, denies the fact that her work is vicious. She describes herself as having a good heart, which is why she gives discounts for mass requests (a demand for multiple operations) even though it goes against the "League of *Baltajiya's*" official price list. She asserts that she does not hesitate to help the poor, performing some operations free of charge, especially since there are a lot of unjust people around, "I want to hit them for no reason; there are a lot of ruthless faces that deserve to be slaughtered."<sup>6</sup>

Last but not the least, there is Sister Mahboulat Al Chawareh, who goes by her real name. She's among the *baltajiya* known for their use of the hammer, and who perform impeccable Kung Fu techniques.

Mahboula states that she is happy to have remained unmarried, particularly after seeing her mother's misfortune with her husband, who used to beat her for no apparent reason. Accordingly, Mahboula decided to avenge her mother and all women; her crimes are violent and lead to permanent disability. Ironically, the victims of most of these crimes are women themselves, who, in turn, specialize in becoming *baltajiya*.

### **The *Baltajiya* and Unemployment**

The Egyptian government does not conceal the rise in unemployment; but indicators differ between governmental sources and those of other economic experts. The government attributes this bad phase to the continuous fluctuation in the population of 72 million people, and to the inability of the economic market to encompass an increasing labor force of fresh graduates emerging annually.

Official statistics indicate that the unemployment rate in Egypt has reaches 9.9% of the work force; around 2.4 million people. On the other hand, other economic sources estimate the unemployed rate to be 4.5 million, while yet another source estimates it at 6 million.

Specialists say that the problem of the *baltajiya* is likely to increase because the rate of unemployment is on the rise and Egyptian students graduating average around

160,000 a year, while the number of secondary school diplomas holders is around 600,000. Thus, 350,000 graduates are expected to enter the job market, 150,000 of which are PhD holders.

The International Monetary Fund states that Egypt must achieve a growth of 6% to be able to find 600,000 job opportunities for the new graduates and the unemployed. If that happens, more people will use their time more wisely and desist from joining the *baltajiyas*.

### **Endnotes**

1. <http://www.alarabiya.net/Articles/2005/12/01/19116.htm>
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*

### **Egyptian Pharmacist Plots to Kidnap Company Owner's Daughter**

Authorities in Alexandria arrested a female pharmacist for hiring a man to kidnap the daughter of a trading firm owner, demanding ransom. She gave him anesthetic to use on the child after kidnapping her from school, and the keys to her apartment, instructing him to take her there. The kidnapper leaked the information to the father, later confessing that he was hired for the kidnapping. He admitted that the pharmacist was plotting the kidnapping because she was in dire need of money. March 14, 2006 HYPERLINK "<http://www.alwafd.org/front/print.php?id=5384&tbl=accidentnews&tbl2>" <http://www.alwafd.org/front/print.php?id=5384&tbl=accidentnews&tbl2>

### **Egyptian Woman Kills her Mother-in-Law**

An Egyptian woman strangled her mother-in-law to death, using a veil. The accused was arrested and confessed to committing the crime, claiming that she was taking revenge on the mother-in-law because the latter had been exerting pressure on the couple to cede their current apartment. It is alleged that on the day of the murder, the two women had had a long heated argument. The suspect then pushed the victim to the floor, strangling her to death. She then faked a robbery by stealing jewelry and money from the apartment. March 14, 2006 HYPERLINK "<http://www.alwafd.org/front/print.php?id=5383&tbl=accidentnews&tbl2>" <http://www.alwafd.org/front/print.php?id=5383&tbl=accidentnews&tbl2>