

Sudanese refugee youth 'gangs' in Cairo

Themba Lewis

Belonging to a gang is a rejection of given notions of refugee life in Cairo as well as an alternative outlet for expression.

Youth violence emerged from Cairo's Sudanese refugee community in 2005 in the form of self-declared gangs, which reshaped existing concepts of social systems and challenged refugee advocates and assistance providers. In the years since, some service providers have limited or tailored access, authorities have increased their maltreatment of and scepticism towards refugee youth, and relations between refugees and Egyptian society have become increasingly strained.

The behaviour of Cairo's Sudanese youth gangs should be understood as coming out of a network of relationships and social structures that support the gangs' members – rather than wholly through

visible negative consequences such as violence and the potential for a backlash against migrant communities. Those who call themselves 'gang' members offer a new way of understanding collective representation amongst Sudanese in Cairo and, however potentially misguided, an alternative, refugee-generated means of ensuring protection and assistance for those unable or no longer willing to rely on UNHCR or the Egyptian government.

Between 1994 and 2005, more than half of the recognised Sudanese refugees in Egypt were resettled to other countries and UNHCR Cairo became one of the largest resettlement operations in the world.

This is no longer the case, and many Sudanese who had hoped to leave Cairo have instead had to stay. In Egypt, however, reservations placed on the 1951 Convention and domestic law effectively cripple refugees' ability to create local livelihoods to support themselves. Egypt does not fulfil the requirements of local integration as identified by UNHCR for its massive urban refugee and asylum-seeker population.

A dramatic demonstration organised by Sudanese refugees in late 2005, which boasted participation in the thousands and aimed to address a documented list of grievances, was dispersed with significant force and loss of life at the hands of Egyptian police. The horrendous outcome has had a direct impact on the collective psychosocial state of the southern Sudanese refugee population and

has been a critical component in the rise of violent youth groups.

Reinterpreting social order and reaffirming status

The gangs initially emerged to serve strictly social purposes, establishing networks of youth who, in cooperation, could afford to throw parties and plan social events. Gang youth in Cairo – who are predominantly but not exclusively male – adopt fashion trends, dance moves and symbolic gestures such as hand signs to conspicuously identify with cultural imagery of successful, strong, young, black males who embody (and rap about) experiences of poverty, disrespect and solidarity in resistance to forces devised to divide, oppress and subjugate them. Specifically, overt dedication to and identification with Western hip-hop culture, fashion and artists also represent a visible manifestation of rejection of the Egyptian and Sudanese cultural systems with which displaced Sudanese youth are expected to identify.

Rooted in the inability of a community to realise common goals and solve chronic problems, the development of gangs is a creative process that allows for deviance from established hierarchies – in express opposition to, and a direct result of, impotent systems.

In protracted situations younger generations may mature without being able to fulfil meaningful social roles, gender-based responsibilities, and inter-generational relationships, while organisations such as UNHCR may assume the role of ‘provider’, potentially undermining pre-established systems of social authority. These circumstances “have a particular impact on adolescent refugee males ... who are unable to assume traditional male roles after puberty, and who have little prospect of establishing a sustainable livelihood.”¹

As refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo endure year after year, many lose faith in the ability of institutions

to affect their circumstances positively. As various efforts to change this have repeatedly failed, disenfranchisement has become entrenched and intractable. This may encourage the embrace of opposition as lifestyle. In a very real sense, gang membership in Cairo represents an assertion of control and pride in the face of circumstances of displacement that often suggest the opposite. Gangs provide an



Sudanese refugee youth party in Cairo.

alternative for the realisation of authority through new conceptions of strength and social order.

Gang affiliation also solidifies a sense of belonging to a much larger transnational community. Two of the Cairo groups have members in resettlement countries all over the world (as well as back in Sudan); the experience of migration itself globalises gangs. Further, by utilising the lingo, identifying signs and appearance of American rappers, young Sudanese in Cairo signify their belonging to larger foreign networks.

Violence

Violence, although directed by gang youth almost exclusively towards other gang youth, is a form of pro-active resistance to the powerlessness that permeates the lives of displaced Sudanese in Egypt. Violent conflict between gangs may serve as an avenue to subvert oppressive structures by allowing

youth to demonstrate social influence through force and irreverence.

‘Retaliatory’ violence against Egyptians or UNHCR would be illogical as youth have limited involvement with, and even less confidence in, these forces and such action would make perpetrators extremely vulnerable at the hands of the state. Ironically, it is to some extent in the interest of gang-affiliated refugee youth to re-direct violence back into the Sudanese community for the sake of self- and community-preservation vis-à-vis the Egyptian state. Nevertheless, with rising levels of inter-gang violence, such groups threaten the security of a much larger proportion of the refugee population than themselves.

The Sudanese refugee community in Cairo is large and very diverse. Gang-affiliated youth comprise only a fragment of the whole, and certainly do not represent all young Sudanese in Cairo. But youth gangs challenge mainstream conceptions of the refugee experience in significant ways. Gangs dramatise a reassertion of control under circumstances

in which other ways to achieve this may appear not to exist.

Clearly, violence from or within refugee communities is disturbing and puts lasting protection at significant risk. However, gang structures provide an opportunity for policymakers, advocates and academics alike to update concepts of refugee life, better understand the experience and the potential consequences of protracted circumstances, and recognise elements of that experience that are perhaps otherwise unseen.

Themba Lewis (thembaLewis@gmail.com) is an independent researcher. This article is drawn from research presented at the RSC 25th Anniversary International Conference, Oxford, December 2007, and the 11th IASFM Conference, Cairo, 2008.

1. Crisp, J (2003) ‘No Solutions in Sight: The Problem of Protracted Refugee Situations in Africa’, UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/research/RESEARCH/3e2d66c34.pdf>