

Beyond the Arab Spring

An interview with Lisa Anderson, president, American University in Cairo

ON JANUARY 25, 2011, the Arab Spring erupted in Cairo, initiating several years of instability for Egypt. During all of this political upheaval, the American University in Cairo (AUC) was consolidating a major move to a brand new campus in New Cairo, about 25 miles from the original downtown campus that was near Tahrir Square where many of the largest demonstrations have occurred. Lisa Anderson, former dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, was appointed president of AUC in January 2011, after serving as provost at AUC from 2008–2010. Her term has been significantly influenced by the state of unrest in Egypt, creating unique challenges and opportunities.

IE: What are the challenges of managing a university in Egypt during such tumultuous times?

ANDERSON: I think it has been very difficult but very gratifying. This is a spectacular institution and to say it has continued to admit fabulous students, launching graduates into professional lives in Egypt and the region, is very satisfying.

IE: How has the American University in Cairo (AUC) been touched by the events of the past few years in Egypt? The main AUC campus is now far from Tahrir Square and downtown Cairo (a move that was in the offing before the advent of the Arab Spring).

ANDERSON: We have run a budget deficit almost from the beginning of the revolution. With the move to the new campus, we expanded dramatically, physically, and administratively. We were settling in to how we would manage two facilities, and in essence, we had to reinvent our security staff. They had been accustomed to a very simple task of making sure they recognized kids when they came on campus, but suddenly both in New Cairo and downtown, there were genuine security issues. Downtown, there were Molotov cocktails thrown onto the campus and people invading the campus, so we paid a lot of overtime, for example. The security staff were truly heroic and they deserved every piaster they were paid.

The collapse of foreign student enrollment meant the revenue side was not keeping up with the expenses. It's been very complicated and unpredictable, because as soon as you thought you could predict something, something else would happen and it would always have a budgetary impact. So it's been difficult to stay afloat under the circumstances.

IE: Has the number of international students picked up at all?

ANDERSON: In the fall of 2013 all of the American senders of study abroad students ended their programs and said students couldn't come here and that was a function of insurance concerns. The students would have come and many of the parents would have let them come, but the universities' insurance companies were adamant.

In the fall of 2010 we had 500 study abroad students and that went down to about 150 in fall of 2011, and by 2013 it was down to nothing because the situation seemed to be getting more and more violent.

Now the study abroad and international student enrollment has picked up, mostly European right now but we anticipate Americans coming back slowly. There is really no safety and security concern at this juncture that we have not been very nimble in addressing.



Lisa Anderson, president of the American University in Cairo

IE: What has all this required of you as a university president?

ANDERSON: What we in the administration do—and I often joke about this—is emergency management in the morning and strategic planning in the afternoon. It is very hard to think strategically when you are focused on emergency management as we have been. Business continuity has been very important and I'm very proud of it, but it does mean some of the kinds of things you would normally expect of a president whose university is going to be celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2019 are not emphasized as much. I spend time thinking about the future, thinking about a capital campaign for the centennial...we are doing that, but we are behind in my view. That kind of planning has not had the attention it should have. So, I think in some ways, some of the longer-term budget stability and strategic planning have been postponed by the focus on the present.

On the other hand, there wasn't much alternative, and I'm proud that the way we have managed the present has allowed us to think about the future. The fact that we have been able to behave as if we have a future

and our students have a future and we have a research impact that we care about and public outreach that we want to do—that has been very important.

IE: What stresses do you believe the faculty members have felt?

ANDERSON: Most people feel as many Egyptians do in general that they have been working a job and a half. I used to tease my Egyptian colleagues that before the revolution you didn't have to watch the news in the evening because it was the same as it had been the day before and the day before that. And all of a sudden people had hours of time they had to devote trying to figure out what was going on. You could literally see people getting exhausted. It was physically exhausting to be alert when you hadn't had to be alert. This whole country—suddenly you had 85 million political scientists.

IE: Have you been able to continue recruiting new faculty?

ANDERSON: Absolutely. The last couple of years more faculty have been wanting to go on leave, but we continue to recruit, we continue to have spectacular research results and we are continuing to operate as an ambitious university in a context where it is very important for Egypt to be able to say, "We have scientific ambitions, we have educational ambitions...no matter what else is happening in the country." We have represented that for Egypt in a way that has been very worthwhile. We have served the purposes of our students and the country as a whole by being able to operate as if everything were normal.

IE: What about faculty members feeling free to speak out among colleagues or in the classroom?

ANDERSON: I wouldn't say there is no concern at all, but AUC is in a privileged position in Egypt. We always have been.

IE: Are you saying that it's easier for someone here to speak up at AUC than at other higher education institutions in Egypt?

ANDERSON: Absolutely, and that has always been true. But that entails a measure of responsibility on our part. We recognize the good fortune we enjoy and use it responsibly, so when we talk about political issues, we do so recognizing that many of our colleagues in



A sign on campus that reads: The American University in Cairo College of Continuing Education

the rest of the country are not feeling as relaxed about this as we do.

It doesn't hurt that we have a long-standing reputation in Egypt as being an asset to the country; it also doesn't hurt that we operate in English and are therefore not necessarily as accessible as what is said in Arabic.

I think people are not necessarily more concerned but more alert, figuring out whether there will be more restrictions than there are now. One of the things I do worry about is that I don't want people to preemptively self-censor. It is important that we as AUC be a place where debates can take place. They should take place civilly, but debate is important and if we don't represent that and if we don't say there are differing opinions about things, then it would be very hard to make the case that this is an American-style institution. It would also be very difficult going forward to make the kind of impact that we pride ourselves on having represented in Egypt in the past. So, it's important that we acknowledge who we are and what we ought to be doing and not get too caught up in the anxieties of the moment.

IE: Are AUC students participating in demonstrations?

ANDERSON: Most Egyptian students actually live at home, and we are not acting in loco parentis. For the international students who live in our dorms, we have dorm curfews that always existed. We do a lot of counseling with students about what is wise and safe. Several years ago some



The American University in Cairo

study abroad students were picked up in a demonstration and deported and we had advised them that they should not be doing what they were doing. It didn't surprise us that they were picked up and it didn't surprise us that they were deported.

There are two Egyptian students in prison for being in protests.

IE: What does the university do for the two students who are imprisoned?

ANDERSON: We don't provide any legal services for any individuals with legal problems, unless you are on university business. That is standard in the States and we operate like an American university. We made sure we knew where the students were, that they were safe, and they could contact their families. Beyond that we are not involved. We are very careful and we do the same thing for everybody.

There is a concern on the part of the colleagues of the students who are incarcerated that they be allowed to resume their studies. Unlike national universities where you can basically not attend the class and take the exam at the end of the semester, we actually have attendance requirements.



Our students cannot be gone for the whole semester and just take an exam. But we have told them that as soon as they are released, they are more than welcome to come back and pick up where they left off. In fact, we are hoping their sentences

will be reduced and they will be able to come back fairly quickly.

We do have students whose siblings are at national universities and our students are very much alive to the issues in the rest of higher education. During the most tumultuous times at national universities, we had protests here that were driven as much by solidarity with students at other universities as they were about issues here. We had students close this campus for about 10 days several years ago protesting tuition increases. Tuition here is high, and I don't want to suggest that is not part of what was at issue, but it was also a reflection of this revolutionary sentiment. Students felt free enough to have a protest.

So, I think there is a sense of this generation of students in Egypt as having a common experience and our students increasingly are recognizing that they are fortunate they did have semesters that finished. If you look at the spring semester

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last year in the national universities, it was about eight weeks long. It started late and ended early. In many ways AUC students have been fortunate to be at a place where the capacity to maintain standard operating procedures, standards for attendance and for exams and grades has been hugely important.

IE: What else would you especially want to share with your counterparts in the United States?



Students at the American University in Cairo

ANDERSON: I guess my most important concern is that an investment in a study abroad experience for a student is an investment for a lifetime. We can now feel reasonably confident and comfortable that the safety and security of young people who are going to be associated with the American University in Cairo are not in jeopardy. So, it is important for students to come now even if they are not happy with the policies of the government, be-

cause this is an investment in an education that will serve the United States and these young people well for decades.

There are so few places in the region that are in fact able to ensure the safety and security of people that it is a mistake *not* to say, “Okay, this may not be the free-wheeling place we would like it to be but it is still the place where you can learn Arabic and where you can actually see how people live here.” The existential concerns that people should have about safety and security are legitimate, but once they have gotten past that and they can say that they really aren’t worried, the students are in good dorms, the buses are safe, the university knows what is happening: then people really ought to be coming. **IE**

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