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Jeannie Sowers Associate Professor of Political Science travels to Egypt



Jeannie Sowers

Associate Professor of Political Science -- Egypt

Professor Sowers travelled to Egypt in February 2013 to continue her research on environmental issues and politics and to learn more about the ongoing political revolution that began in January 2011.

With the assistance of a CIE travel grant funded by the Yale-Maria bequest for Middle East Studies, I was able to spend twelve days in Cairo during February 2013. I returned to Egypt, where I have been conducting research on environmental issues and politics for some time, to learn more about the ongoing political revolution that began in January 2011. Specifically, I was interested in debates over the controversial constitution that had just been passed through a referendum, which many people boycotted in protest. I talked with a people from a variety of political perspectives and parties about what the new constitution and ongoing revolution means to Egyptians.

I had last been back to Egypt in the summer of 2011, to gather material for the introduction to an edited volume (*The Journey to Tahrir*, Verso, 2012) and since then, much had changed. The initial euphoria and unity that marked the mass uprising against the Mubarak regime had, somewhat predictably, given way to sharp political divisions, between political parties, elites, and activists. Worryingly, political leaders of various currents-- whether from the Muslim Brotherhood and their affiliated Freedom and Justice Party, the liberal opposition loosely grouped into a "National Salvation Front," and the various Islamist *salafi* parties-- had been unable to reach significant compromises on many important political issues. While I was in Cairo, however, it seemed that the worsening economic and political crisis might prompt the various centers of power to consider modifying their entrenched positions.

My trip was also in response to interest in my recently published book, *Environmental Politics in Egypt* (Routledge, 2013), from the community of environmental experts and activists in Cairo. An environmental association, Nature Conservation Egypt, invited me to lecture on the book, which was hosted by the British Council in Cairo. (See [NCE's pictures of the event](#).) A local newspaper, *Egypt Independent*, followed up with an [interview about environmental politics in Egypt](#). NCE also organized a separate, informal reception where we could all meet each other and exchange ideas.



Downtown Cairo (Wast al-Balad)



Young Egyptian environmentalists (Noor Noor, Lama el-Hatow, and Sarah Rifaat) and Prof. Sowers, at an informal reception hosted by Nature Conservation Egypt. Lama and Sarah founded the National Coalition on Climate Change, and Noor is the Executive Coordinator of Nature Conservation Egypt. Picture taken by the late Mindy Baha el-Din.

The mix of attendees at the lecture captured some of the social changes underway in Egypt. In addition to established environmental professionals, many of whom I had interviewed for the book, there were young activists, community organizers affiliated with Islamic charities, and an academic from Al Azhar, the leading Islamic institution of learning. Under the Mubarak regime, fewer organizations had been involved in discussions of environmental problems under the Mubarak regime, since environmental issues were largely left to technical experts rather than seen as viable subjects for public and scholarly debate. Now, the discussion was animated, and it was exciting to see how many creative approaches environmentalists are trying to address grave problems.

Shortly after I left Cairo, one of the founders of Nature Conservation Egypt and someone that I had known for a while passed away unexpectedly. She left behind two children, a grieving husband, and a gap in the close-knit community of environmentalists that she helped foster in Cairo. Her death reminded me of the importance of working for social change while we have the opportunity.

As I travelled around Cairo for interviews and document collection, I was struck at how the largest city in Africa continues to function through political stalemate, a deteriorating economy, and a lack of any credible civil police force. The traffic has become worse, as cars park willy-nilly on sidewalks and streets, narrowing traffic corridors, while the subways and trains are sometimes shut down by protests. Many of Greater Cairo's estimated 13 million inhabitants are thus working longer days given the transport problems. They also face significant price increases for fuel and

food, rising unemployment, and thus increasing poverty rates. Yet street life is still vibrant and I found the typical Cairene mix of humor, generosity, and sociability wherever I went, even as frustration mounts with traffic jams, price increases, and a new political establishment that seems unable to grapple with the spiraling economic downturn.

Cairo is also impacted by the great national and regional tragedy unfolding in Syria, as Syrian refugees with enough resources to make it to Egypt trickle in. Over the years Cairo has seen waves of refugee communities, including Palestinians, Lebanese, Sudanese, Ethiopians, and Iraqis, all fleeing the horrors of war. In the relatively affluent neighborhood where I was staying, I met several Syrian families who left their shops in the old city of Damascus, and come to Cairo to try and sustain their families selling handicrafts. They mourned the loss of life back home, and

