
LISA ANDERSON



Innovation and Agility Will Define 21st Century Governance

Lisa Anderson took office as President of the American University in Cairo just as the Egyptian revolution erupted in 2011. Despite its complicated aftermath, the upheaval has provided an invaluable opportunity: we must invent, discover and embrace new ways of widening participation in government, says the political scientist and expert in regime change and Middle East politics.

“The Arab world may show us the future,” she told graduates in her 2013 commencement speech at the Hertie School. Anderson postulates that perhaps “we will not care about priority or power as much as we will value innovation and agility, wherever it appears, in the world of the 21st century.”

As is happening in the Arab world now, the formal institution of government must evolve, and governments will have to be more responsive—and respond more quickly, says Anderson. “What used to take months to accomplish will now be realized more quickly and with much more interaction.”

Just as it spawned momentum for the Egyptian uprising, Anderson thinks the rapid development of information technology will continue affecting policymaking in the future, speeding up the political cycle.

This may, of course, lead to superficial or knee-jerk reactions, but Anderson says that over time crowds do reflect on their actions.

This is, in part, because young people today are more comfortable with collective decision-making.

In the future, institutions of many kinds will change the way they credit ideas, lauding broader groups of participants. This kind of inclusiveness also means adapting how we govern ourselves to involve many stakeholders.

“Philosophers, economists, engineers—they all have a different way of looking at a problem—there is no one way, but we need to invent the new integrated approach,” Anderson says.

Change can’t spark in a vacuum, she says, stressing how important it is for young people to know about the history and evolution of the world in order to understand its strengths and weaknesses. But she warns: This “wide and catholic exposure to how we have historically understood how to approach a problem must be combined with the skills to encounter what you don’t expect.”

“We have the capacity to equip the next generation of leaders to be responsive and collaborative, if we can expose them to as many different ways to approach a problem as possible and then empower them to invent the approach they will need.”

Lisa Anderson was previously Dean of Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs and is a specialist in Middle Eastern politics.