“Challenges to Transition: The Egyptian Case.”

On February 13, 2013, the Center for Gulf Studies at the American University of Kuwait hosted a lecture by Dr. Ann Lesch entitled, “Challenges to Transition: The Egyptian Case.” The talk outlined what Dr. Lesch perceives as the main drivers that led to the eventual downfall of Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, as well as an analysis of the present political situation and future challenges. The circumstances leading up to the Egyptian revolution of 2011 were characterized by a deteriorating economic situation for the majority of Egyptians, due largely to the Government’s reversal on land reform policies undertaken by Gamal Abdul Nasser and other neo-liberal economic policies that widened the gap between rich and poor. This, coupled with a gradual erosion of public services and frustration regarding regional issues such as Palestine, led to several public protests taking place in the first decade of the 2000s. The torture and killing of Khalid Said in June, 2010 by Egyptian police as well as the popular revolution in Tunisia proved to be among the major catalysts that ignited the mass protests against Hosni Mubarak.

Turning to Egypt’s present political situation, Dr. Lesch discussed the main positive and negative realities that exist today. Among the negatives, Dr. Lesch described the threat of growing sectarian tensions and a reduction in security, as well as a grim outlook for the economy. However, the positives she described included: the growth in grassroots organizing to bring change on a community level, the ability to vote, freedom of speech, and a growth in cultural creativity. The key actors in today’s Egypt include, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafi movements, non-religious political parties, the Revolutionary Youth, the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces (SCAF), and civil society. Following the victory of the Freedom of Justice Party, several power struggles have taken place, including Prime Minister Morsi’s firing of several top military generals, as well as the buildup and reactions to his Constitutional Declaration.

Dr. Lesch concluded her lecture by addressing possibilities for Egypt’s political future. The Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed an increase in political influence after the revolution. However, will this influence decline as the economic situation continues to deteriorate and be exploited by other political actors such as the Salafist movements? Or will the Brotherhood’s ability to mobilize and capitalize on successes such as Egypt’s role in ending the Gaza war of 2012 allow them to maintain their political prominence? According to Dr. Lesch, the political future of Egypt remains unpredictable, with key issues unaddressed such as the role of the SCAF in Egyptian politics, and the continued lack of accountability for those who committed crimes against civilians during the 2011 protests.

The Center for Gulf Studies (CGS) at the American University of Kuwait aims to promote greater cultural understanding of and increased intellectual interest in the Gulf, by facilitating free and open academic discourse on a range of issues that both shape and challenge this critical region of the world. The goal of CGS is to enable scholars as well as political and civil society actors both within and outside the region to contribute and add value to the burgeoning field of Gulf Studies, while at the same time informing and engaging the general public. To this end, the CGS encourages, supports, and cultivates interesting and original research on the Gulf, while regularly organizing a variety of public academic events such as lectures, roundtable discussions, and conferences.