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Public Administration for the Dead and for the Living

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Public Administration for the Dead and for the Living

Public Administration is an interesting field of study and practice. Officials are facing complex problems all the time. Moving cemeteries perceived to have historical value is one such difficult decision that has sensitive emotional, economic, religious and political repercussions, and no one easy answer. One truth remains; respect citizens and hear them out.

Recently, a huge uproar started in Cairo when government authorities decided to build a new highway by demolishing a section of the cemeteries in the City of the Dead, a district perceived by some to be of great historical value. The problem here is like a double-edged sword. It is not only an issue with the relocation of the cemeteries, but also an issue with the definition of the term *historical*, which partially explains the confusion and the reason for the outcry. Come to think of it, how should a public official weigh the rights of the living, versus the rights of the dead, and is it possible?

When I first visited Washington D.C. as a young scholar more than twenty years ago, what struck me most was the great reverence bestowed on its memorials: the Abraham Lincoln memorial, the Arlington memorial, the Thomas Jefferson memorial, the Vietnam Veterans memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the National World War II memorial and the Franklin Roosevelt memorial, to mention just a few. Americans were doing what they can to remember their late leaders and recognize their life achievements.

Back in Egypt, and since ancient Egyptian times—with the pyramids, temples and ancient tombs painstakingly decorated and equipped with everything the deceased person may need in his or her after-life—we have carried on with a certain degree of exaggeration in our construction of tombs and cemeteries. Thank God, no mummification occurs and no treasures get to be buried with the deceased. Yet, the Islamic and Coptic cemeteries, still in use in many parts of Cairo, never fail to baffle tourists. They wonder what those tiny mosque or church-like structures are spreading over wide expanses of land. “These are our cemeteries,” we tell them. In old Cairo, the cemetery area is best referred to as, “The City of the Dead,” and includes a great number of historic memorials, shrines and small mosques. Over time, the City of the Dead has developed into being not only a tourist attraction, for the monuments it encompasses, but also for the amazing fact that there are people inhabiting the area and whole extended families living casually with and amongst the dead.

Arguments were made for and against the demolishing act. The rationale given by government was to give more room for the expansion of roads and to serve public interest. According to Egyptian law, the government can forfeit private property if it contradicts with public interest, so this is legally acceptable. Officials claim that a new highway has to pass through the cemetery area. Officials also say that the tombs and shrines needing removal do not have a historic value since they were established less than a hundred years ago, are not registered as antiquities and are not within the recognized boundaries of historical Cairo that was defined by the UNESCO in 1997.

Those against demolishing the cemeteries note that we may still be ruining part of our historical heritage. While some new nations are trying to make themselves a history, others are ignorantly demolishing their history in favor of more concrete and infrastructure. The claim is that buildings of historical significance may sometimes be less than 100 years old, giving examples of memorials of political leaders or presidents, and/or shrines that were developed less than 100 years ago following aesthetic architectural standards. We should note here that some of the landmark memorials in Washington D.C. are less than 100 years old; Jefferson memorial was finished in 1943, the WWII memorial was authorized in 1993 and even the Lincoln memorial was completed in 1922. A quick checking of the literature confirmed that assigning a “historical” status to a building is not just based on chronological factors. Rather it is often a matter of choice by governments for nationalistic, economic or political reasons, such as the desire to promote national identity, political ideology or simply attract tourism.

Further opposition to demolishing the cemeteries was backed by sentimental and religious justifications. Many believe that the dead should not be disturbed. Tractors are not supposed to invade cemeteries without at least prior notification to the families of the deceased and without providing them with an alternative space to move to.

It is not uncommon that governments decide to move cemeteries. It has happened before in Egypt, and it has happened, and is happening, in many parts of the world. Cities may run out of space and decide they need to relocate the cemeteries to build parks, provide housing, construct schools or build hospitals. Oftentimes, the rights of the living are given precedence to those of the dead. Nevertheless, we need to remember to ask the living about what rights they want, when and in what way!