

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 7 No. 1, April 2023

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-7-issue-1-april-2023/>

Obituary: Helmi Sharawy (1935-2023)

Written by: Reem Abou-El-Fadl, PhD, Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics of the Middle East, SOAS University of London.

Hemi Sharawy: not only a comrade in struggle and research, but much more than that. We were among the first Egyptians to realise that our national struggle was an indivisible part of the struggle for the independence of all the peoples and nations of Africa. We were agreed that Egypt and Africa were one unit, had been so since millennia, and should remain so. We supported together, from the first day, the 1955 Bandung Conference and 1957 Afro-Asian Conference from which the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation was born. Since then, Sharawy has participated in the continuous struggles of all the African peoples, supported national liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, and stood against the apartheid regime in South Africa.

- Samir Amin (1931-2018), Marxist theorist and Director of Third World Forum in Dakar, Chair of the World Forum for Alternatives

On 20 March 2023, Egypt lost its foremost Africanist and renowned leftist activist Helmi Sharawy; a notable scholar who had become a legend in Arab and African intellectual and in oppositional circles. The transformation of Cairo into a leading Third World capital at the height of the decolonisation wave, and the fortunes of numerous Arab and African movements for liberation, thereafter, are all reflected in his extraordinary life story. Sharaw was instrumental in forging Egypt's connections with independence struggles in Algeria, Angola, Cameroon, Congo, Eritrea, Kenya, South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Zanzibar, and Zimbabwe.

This journey began in his twenties, when Sharawy became responsible for supporting the African liberation movements hosted in Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s, as part of Gamal Abdel Nasser's policies of Third World solidarity and nonalignment. From the 1970s until the Egyptian revolutionary uprising of 2011, Sharawy was a tireless activist for political change, leading campaigns in solidarity with the Palestinians, and against the neoliberalism and corruption of successive authoritarian regimes.

In 1987, he founded the Arab and African Research Centre in Cairo, which he directed until 2010. He also became an Executive Committee member of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

A Marxist of Arab nationalist sensibilities, and an Egyptian of pan-African convictions, Sharawy's life spanned encounters and friendships with future leaders from Sudan to South Africa, and a critical yet unabashedly partisan look at African and Arab cultures and societies.

Sharawy spent his childhood in the village of Abu Kullus in Munifiyya in the 1930s and his teens in the big city after his family's migration to Cairo in 1947. His interest in the political events of the day began early, as did his keenness to write about them: he began writing and editing his first political publication, *Al-Shu'la* or 'The Flame', with his neighbourhood friends in 1950. His youthful writings reflect his early zeal for the national liberation cause. He and his fellow writers discussed the rise of Egypt's guerrilla resistance against the British, the parliamentary elections between status quo and anticolonial forces, and Egypt's participation in the 1948 Palestine War. He was briefly drawn to the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-British activities but ultimately rejected their religious politics. Instead, he became increasingly absorbed in the activities and writings of the Egyptian communist left, after meeting representatives of this trend in his school years. He continued to associate with communist intellectuals and activists during his studies at the Faculty of Arts of Cairo University, which he began in 1954.

Sharawy followed an unorthodox path towards Africa and his hefty responsibilities in Egypt's ruling apparatus. He was guided at every turn, however, by his keen interest in progressive politics and popular culture, and by his idealism—seeking employment that would not depend on personal connections and networks. He graduated from the Department of Sociology at Cairo University in 1958; and, for some time, it was thought that he was destined for academia. He drafted various proposals for a master's dissertation, and worked diligently as a research assistant supporting the founding of a Centre for Popular Arts at Cairo University.

During this period, a serendipitous visit to the African Association—with which his name would later become synonymous—drew him to the world of the liberation struggles of Africa. Sharawy began to volunteer as a researcher and translator at the African Association, assisting its chair, Egyptian diplomat Abd Al-Aziz Ishak, and its mastermind, head of the Bureau of African Affairs in the presidency, Muhammad Fayiq. He relished becoming acquainted with the personalities and networks behind such grand public events as the Asian African Conference held in Bandung in 1955, and the inaugural Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Conference convened in Cairo in 1957. His first contacts were with Muhammad Hussein of Somalia, Felix Moumié of Cameroon, and Joshua Nkomo of Zimbabwe. In 1958, he coordinated with the presidency in hosting delegations from Eritrea and Zanzibar. Based on this experience, Fayiq entrusted Sharawy with increasing responsibilities. Within a year, he had been given the role of Coordinator of the African Liberation Movements in Cairo. Sharawy became personally responsible for helping young liberation leaders set up offices in Cairo,

linking them with dedicated African language broadcasts on Cairo Radio, introducing them to major powers' representatives in Egypt, particularly through the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation headquartered in Cairo, and coordinating the delivery of material assistance to their organisations. Many would become leaders upon independence, maintaining their contacts with him for the rest of their careers.

By 1960, Sharawy's appointment was confirmed as Senior Researcher in the presidency's Bureau of African Affairs. He was posted to the 'Information and Evaluation Group' of the presidency; this was the highest political analysis body in the country at the time and which received top-secret information on domestic and international affairs. During this period, Sharawy married his lifelong partner and comrade Tawhida Tawfiq, a translator and linguist who was embarking on higher education at the time. She was the niece of one of Egypt's foremost philosophers and completed a degree in Philosophy herself. Alongside her husband, she too contended with the political challenges of the moment, and indeed of his particular position, as well as the innumerable personal challenges that these brought upon the family. She and Sharawy made their Cairo home into a haven for their guests visiting from the rest of the continent, and a library of books for Egyptians seeking to learn about it. Their son, Ayman, and daughter, Mai, became acquainted with prominent political figures from a young age, and they would hear news of coups and revolutions from their father's friends and colleagues visiting their home.

Vignettes from Sharawy's rich experience in Africa over the next decade offer us an insight into these events and to his thinking and skills in dealing with them. After the Congo's military coup in 1960, Sharawy wrote three position reports that underpinned Cairo's developing policy of support for Patrice Lumumba; this included making clandestine arrangements to smuggle his family out to safety in Cairo. Sharawy was a member of Egypt's delegations to the independence celebrations of Tanganyika in 1961, and Zanzibar in 1963—each time staying on longer to build his own network of movement cadres, trade unionists, party members, and intellectuals. These visits illuminated for him the contours of inter-African rivalries, and particularly why leaders as different as Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah were wary of Cairo's influence. He also observed the dynamics of Afro-Arab relations, whether in terms of inter-ethnic tensions, essentialist historical representations, or differences between states. On the latter, he noted paradoxes such as Egypt's position of non-intervention when militants attacked the Arab communities of Zanzibar in 1965 and requested Egypt's help.

Sharawy would regularly have to reconcile his nationalist duties in the presidency with his Marxist predilections outside it. In 1963, he assisted with preparations for Egypt's role in co-founding the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) and hosting its inaugural summit the following year. As the decade unfolded, Sharawy had to mediate personally between competing liberation

movements from the same country or territory, which held pro-Soviet or pro-Chinese loyalties. He also had to make difficult decisions as to which groups should receive the resources Egypt had to offer. Sharawy personally harboured a sympathy for Maoism, but he found the pro-Soviet liberation movements to be intellectually sophisticated and diplomatically dynamic, superior in their impact to their rivals. Sharawy's radical views gave him some critical distance when conducting his official responsibilities. For instance, he felt frustrated with the way the OAU ultimately functioned to contain the liberation movements: in the interests of the ruling bureaucracies, giving the example of the OAU's silence over Ethiopia's hostile behaviour towards Eritrea, and of Egypt's position favouring Leopold Senghor over Sheikh Anta Diop of Senegal. Sharawy was, of course, closely affected by Egypt's fortunes within the Casablanca Group of progressive African states, which moved towards moderation and concessions as the decade wore on.

This golden era in Sharawy's life was dealt a series of blows with Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war, the death of Abdel Nasser in 1970, and the rise of Anwar Sadat, whose presidency saw him abandon many of Egypt's African and, indeed, Arab commitments. In 1971, Sadat imprisoned Sharawy's former boss Muhamad Fayiq, and, by 1975, Sharawy was removed from his position. Absorbing these shocks, Sharawy turned to focus on writing, teaching, and building spaces for political opposition--moving between Sudan, Tunisia, and Egypt for the rest of his career. His distance from the political centre grew with time. Although he had lost his position at the presidency, Sharawy initially negotiated the opportunity to remain active at the African Association, which was no longer used politically by the regime but continued to host several African liberation movements. From 1973 to 1975, Sharawy proceeded to work on transforming it into a cultural and intellectual centre, renaming it the African Society. Sympathetic colleagues who remained in the presidency provided resources and assistance, and Sharawy could also call on his vast African network of scholars and students for collaborations. These included the African Association of Political Science, itself founded in Dar es Salaam in late 1973, following which its General Secretary, Zimbabwean activist-academic Nathan Shamurayira, came to Cairo to hold a special meeting for the North African region in 1974. Sharawy would go on to become this organisation's president from 1988 to 1990.

In 1975, in a move personally overseen by Anwar Sadat, Sharawy was dismissed from his post. He was then moved to the position of Cultural Coordinator in the new Sudan Affairs Ministry as part of the Egypt Integration Programme until 1980. This position was seen as a 'safe' for him to occupy, betraying the regime's underestimation of the political potential of the cultural field. Sharawy used his new position to connect with critical thinkers across Sudan's different regions and to foster links with the Eritrean Liberation Front and its allies in the Sudanese Communist Party. From 1976 to 1979, Sharawy was

Visiting Professor at the Institute of African Studies of Khartoum University, delivering lectures comparing the fortunes of Arab and African liberation movements. Indeed, he developed close personal relations with the Eritrean revolutionaries and communists in Sudan and made long-awaited visits to the 'liberated territories' in the late 1970s. His own personal preference had long been for open Egyptian sponsorship of the Eritrean cause, in opposition to the official positions of caution under Abdel Nasser, and downright hostility under Sadat.

Sharawy's immersion in the political and cultural complexities of the continent did not take him away from Egypt and the upheavals it was experiencing. As the preparations for the 1978 Camp David summit gained momentum, Sharawy played a leading role in the resistance of Egyptian and Arab intellectuals to this policy, co-founding the first anti-normalisation movement in Egypt and the Arab world. This group evolved into the 'Committee for the Defence of National Culture' upon the signing of the Israeli Egyptian peace treaty in 1979, with the purpose of formally opposing its clauses on cultural exchange. The Committee attracted a broad membership and won popular acclaim with its protests. Foremost among these was its members' protest against Israel's admission to the 1981 Cairo International Book Fair. Sharawy participated in the action and was arrested and held for almost a month, after which he left Egypt. Upon his release, a friend of his, and one of the founders of the new University of Juba in South Sudan, invited him to a teaching position there. In his memoir, Sharawy describes that in his exile, he forged the most profound of friendships and understood the true meaning of solidarity. His stay in Juba was by no means free of politics. From his vantage point in the university, he witnessed the unfolding of the second phase of the Southern Sudanese uprising, Anyanya II, and the divisions amongst his students over who was to bear responsibility for it. He was close to its leader, the late Janjaweed leader John Garang, whose cause he considered right and just.

Sadat's dramatic demise paradoxically propelled Sharawy away from Egypt a second time in late 1981. When news of the president's assassination reached Juba, there were fears that his ally, Sudanese president Gaafar Al-Numayri, might target Egyptian dissidents in the country. Sharawy duly left Sudan, beginning a new phase of his political exile in Tunisia. He landed in Tunis in January 1982 and took up a position in the Cultural Programme of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO), where he stayed until 1986. At ALECSO, Sharawy pursued research projects and publications on Arab-African relations, specifically tackling themes of migration and race. He made field visits to Nigeria, Kenya, Madagascar, and Mali, in which he observed the channels of Arab cultural influence in each case. He also wrote a report on the Arab diaspora communities in Africa, based on fieldwork in Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ghana. His contributions on race relations between the Arabs and Africans consistently reflected his efforts to combat racism in mainstream Arab cultural life and cultural essentialism in some Arab historiography.

Meanwhile, the question of funding for cultural activities loomed large in Sharawy's work. Ultimately, the conservative agenda of Gulf-based donors meant that funding for ALECSO's cultural agenda dried up altogether, forcing Sharawy to depart for Egypt.

On his return to Cairo, Sharawy swiftly became involved in a collective effort to establish an independent research institution, which culminated in the Arab and African Research Centre. He served as its president from 1987 to 2010 and then its vice-president. He and his colleagues navigated the twin challenges posed by the state's monopoly on such initiatives, and the lack of funding sources for them, by a painstaking and slow process of fundraising amongst themselves. The project received the support of institutions such as the Arab Unity Studies Centre in Beirut, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, and several Arab individuals. Recalling this period, Sharawy would cite his inspiration in Samir Amin's three successive projects in Africa: the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning, the Third World Forum, and CODESRIA in Dakar. Sharawy himself was an active member of CODESRIA from 1995 to 1998 and was on its Executive Committee from 2011 to 2015. One of the Arab and African Research Centre's most important legacies was the establishment of the 'Africanists' research cluster, *Afriqaniyyun*, convened by Sharawy himself in regular, in-person meetings. For this postgraduate study group, Sharawy was the octogenarian professor who shared more with their youthful aspirations than with the conservative worldviews of many of his peers and associates. There followed his endowment of the Helmi Sharawy Prize for African Studies in 2010, which provided annual recognition for the research of young Egyptian scholars writing in Arabic, boosting their ability to publish and disseminate their work.

With the outbreak of the Egyptian revolutionary protests in 2011, Sharawy's years of opposition found new outlets. He had already been involved in *Kifaya*, the influential coalition of activists organising against authoritarian president Husni Mubarak, founded in 2004. He now swiftly co-founded a new socialist party, The Socialist Popular Alliance, in the wake of Mubarak's toppling. His activities saw him continually take great risks, amidst waves of violence that proved impossible to predict or stem. The day before the anniversary of the 25 January uprising in 2015, Sharawy participated in a peaceful demonstration in downtown Cairo: he was walking alongside fellow party member and young activist Shaimaa Al-Sabbagh, when she was shot and killed at close range by security forces. Sharawy remained a member of the party's executive until his passing.

Besides the devotion of his energies to building institutions for research and political activism, Sharawy paid consistent attention to his writing and intellectual engagement during these years. His interventions were consistently driven by his sense of the urgency of the popular struggle for liberation, in all its battlefields--whether Arab, African, or both. At the same time, they were informed

by a clear grasp of the complexities and contrasts that made up the African continent. Sharawy rejected the purported divide between North and South, and he dedicated his life to breaking barriers between Arab and non-Arab Africans; yet he was a realist when it came to projects for political union and to the limits of cultural rapprochement. He wrote enthusiastically about the challenges facing intellectuals and educators in surmounting these issues, and the resources they needed. To the end, his eye was equally trained on the problems caused by authoritarianism at home and by neo-imperial interventionism abroad, from the United States and Europeans in particular, which he tracked particularly closely in the broad field of culture. Sharawy's contributions in Arabic were prolific and wide-ranging; they included specialist works such *Sudan at a Crossroads* (Cairo: Dar Gazirat Al-Ward, 2010) and research on Arab-African relations such as *The Arab Uprisings and Africa* (Cairo: Dar Gazirat Al-Ward, 2012) along with numerous academic and media articles. In 2019, he published his much-anticipated memoir, *An Egyptian African Story* (Dar Al-Ain). These works supported his constant campaigns for an improved understanding in Egypt of the diverse realities on the African continent. Between 2010 and 2017, Sharawy was Executive Member of the African Cultures Conference Committee of Egypt's Supreme Council of Culture. He was also a dedicated supporter of the annual Luxor African Film Festival, which honoured him in 2018.

Sharawy further enriched the field of knowledge on Africa in the Arab world by writing and supporting translations from English. He translated sociologist Kwesi Prah's works, for example, on *African Languages for Mass Education* in 2001, and co-translated anthropologist Archie Mafeje's *African Social Formations* in 2007. Sharawy also wrote the introduction to Egypt's Arabic edition of W. E. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, last published in 2002—he had been friends with the great scholar's widow Shirley and stepson David years earlier, during their stay in Cairo. Later, he reviewed the translation of political scientist and anthropologist Mahmud Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, published in Arabic in 2009. This translation was partly through his membership of the Supreme Council of Culture's Translation Committee in 2007. He himself published several significant works in English, including two volumes on *The Heritage of African Languages Manuscripts (Ajami) in Arabic Letters* (Bamako: Afro-Arab Cultural Institute, 2006 & 2017) and a series of rich and thought pieces collected under the title *Political and Social Thought in Africa*, with an introduction by Samir Amin (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2014). He contributed frequently to debates in such scholarly venues as *African Renaissance* and the CODESRIA Bulletin. A new edition of his memoir is forthcoming in English translation.

In 2016, CODESRIA organised a lifetime achievement celebration for Sharawy in Cairo, and Samir Amin wrote the text excerpted above, entitled 'More Than a Comrade', for the occasion. Sharawy and Amin were close friends, and together represented the same breed of tireless activist, thinker, and

internationalist. Sharawy's passing has been described by many as the end of an era. Yet Sharawy's distinctive worldview and analyses were captured across his *oeuvre* of work, and he successfully passed these on to new generations of scholars and activists. He is survived by his widow Tawhida, his children Ayman and Mai, who were joined in their mourning by hundreds of students, colleagues, and comrades. To them now falls the task of honouring his rich legacy.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2023 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990