

Arab Reform Bulletin: April 2007



Published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

April 2007, Volume 5, Issue 3

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Insights and Analysis

Lebanon: Interview with Ziad Baroud, member of the National Council for a New Electoral Law

What is your reading of the current political crisis?

Lebanon's crisis is due to a state-building process that did not get off to the right start; attempts to build the state were aborted and failed to create institutions able to manage the country's political and sectarian diversity. Lebanon thus became an arena for local, regional, and international contestation, with political factions that do not conceal their ties with the outside world. Political forces in Lebanon cannot be isolated from all external connections or alliances, but there must be limits, so that such alliances do not undermine the state. The problem is that the 1926 Lebanese constitution, amended in 1990 after the Taif Agreement, allows for manipulation by political forces.

So where does the blame lie for Lebanon's crisis of institutions, and what is the solution?

There is plenty of blame to go around. Let us consider Lebanon's three major political institutions: the offices of president, speaker of parliament, and prime minister. The presidency's crisis began the day President Emile Lahoud's tenure was extended. Until then the Lebanese state was different from other countries in the Arab world, and actually encouraged the transfer of power. We have not had presidents who wanted to become kings; in fact, since 1946 any attempt by a president to extend his term has provoked a crisis. Lahoud's move hurt relations between Lebanon and the international community and provoked UN Security Council Resolution 1559. The Lebanese and President Lahoud himself have paid dearly for this extension.

Regarding the parliament, Speaker Nabih Berri called for convening a dialogue session, but one must remember that in addition to being speaker, he also heads a political force, Amal. I might not agree with him not calling Parliament into session, but Berri is not actually holding Parliament captive constitutionally because he is not obliged to set a date for the Parliamentary session. What is required of Berri now is that he manage the dialogue and avoid taking sides, because he has become the only one capable of playing this role.

Regarding the office of the prime minister, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora is under a lot of pressure. His government succeeded in several aspects, particularly in negotiating the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 under Chapter VI, not VII (which would have given the UN the right to implement the resolution by force). Siniora also pointed the way toward a Lebanese solution to the problem of Hizballah's arms, leading the government to approve a seven-point plan on which Resolution 1701 was based. The problem today is political polarization, and I do not know if it could have been prevented. The demonstrations and tent camp near the prime minister's headquarters have made Siniora a prisoner in this tragic scene, which seems out of character for Lebanon. This country has never seen one group able to dominate the other, and this diversity created a sort of internal balance. Now the presidency, parliament, and prime ministry are in crisis; it is impossible to imagine a solution unless we reexamine the nature of our institutions.

The Lebanese government seems to be bucking opposition demands, especially regarding an international tribunal to investigate the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri. How will this showdown be resolved?

I think that the government cannot give the opposition everything it is demanding. The government is supported by a parliamentary majority; Hizballah's supporters demonstrated in the streets because they could not exert that sort of pressure via the parliament. The government and the opposition will be forced to concede some demands, but each faction is holding its ground for now because they know that neither has the upper hand—hence the deadlock. As for the recent petition by seventy parliamentarians asking the UN Secretary General for an international tribunal, it is notable that it did not face large-scale opposition. In fact, approving a tribunal system under Chapter VI could suit everyone: the opposition and Berri would have taken a stance against it, but if it were passed in the Security Council, they would save face and survive this crisis. A tribunal under Chapter VII, without Lebanese consent, would be far more problematic. I am not confident, in any case, that the UN is ready to set the precedent of forming a tribunal under Chapter VII to investigate an assassination.

Ziad Baroud is a lawyer, human rights activist, and member of the National Council for a New Electoral Law. This interview was conducted by Omayma Abdel Latif, an Egyptian journalist and Projects Coordinator at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. It was translated from Arabic by Paul Wulfsberg.

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Egypt: Point/Counterpoint on the Constitutional Amendments

Part I: Rebalancing Powers and Rebuilding the Political Center

Karim Haggag

Much of the debate surrounding Egypt's constitutional amendments has focused on individual articles, largely obscuring the rationale behind them: achieving a greater balance of power between the executive and legislative branches and rebuilding the political center.

In order to curtail the powers of the president, long a central opposition demand, the amendments introduced checks on the president's exceptional powers in times of national emergency, including an explicit prohibition against dissolving parliament except under "exceptional circumstances," in which case he must call for new elections within sixty days. Furthermore, the amendments significantly enhance the powers of the prime minister by requiring his approval on important decisions by the president. While the president still appoints and dismisses the prime minister, the parliament may withhold approval, requiring the president to accept the resignation of the government. Only if confirmation is withheld a second time can the president dissolve parliament.

Together with the authority that parliament now has over the national budget and the legislative powers conferred on the Shura Council, these changes establish a direct linkage between the majority party (or coalition) in parliament and the composition and platform of the government. Decisions regarding national resources and government policies are thus placed at the heart of the debate between the executive and the legislature. The president's power to dismiss parliament should be seen as a last resort to break political deadlock.

The second major pillar of the amendments package is an effort to foster greater pluralism in Egypt's party system, which has atrophied under an electoral system that has favored individual candidates over political parties and local issues over national politics. Elections have benefited candidates with the most resources, while diminishing the importance of party affiliation and positions on issues of national importance. Redressing this situation required a constitutional amendment that would allow for a mixed electoral system including elements of both proportional and single district representation, as well as providing for a minimum representation for women in Parliament.

The intention of the prohibition against religious parties was not, as some have charged, to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood from politics, but rather to separate religion from politics. The constitutional prohibition is thus mostly symbolic, adding little to what was already enshrined into law. In this regard, Egypt is by no means unique in the region. The Turkish Constitution features an almost identical provision, whereby the intention has been not to banish Islamists from politics but to establish a threshold that they must cross to be identified as a political party, in effect shedding the religious basis of their platform.

Notwithstanding the objections voiced by opposition parties regarding certain aspects of the amendments, agreement was reached on 32 of the 34 amendments proposed. Opposition centered on the two issues of judicial supervision of elections and the balance between security and civil liberties in combating terrorism.

Amended Article 88 seeks to overcome the huge logistical challenges involved in direct judicial supervision of the balloting process itself. It does not remove the judiciary's role but relegates it to the level of general supervision of the electoral process through an independent electoral commission, in accordance with international practice. The historical record disproves concerns that this might somehow compromise the integrity of the process; in 1987, before the system of direct judicial supervision was introduced, opposition parties managed to win their largest share in parliament to date.

Similarly, the concern regarding infringement on civil liberties in Article 179 must be placed in context. Here the objective is to replace the state of emergency with an anti-terrorism law that would establish a precise definition of terrorist crimes and delineate the security services' authority in combating terrorism.

Taken together, the amendments provide for a transition towards a revived party system and more robust checks on executive authority. Like all such transitions, this one will take time to mature. The value of this exercise should therefore be judged according to how well the amendments achieve those objectives, which ultimately will depend more on the actual practice of politics within the parameters established by the amended Constitution than on the particulars of the amendments themselves.

Karim Haggag is director of the Egyptian Press Office in Washington DC.

Part II: The Truman Show

Ibrahim Eissa

Anyone who believes that U.S. President George Bush is succeeding in Iraq can believe that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is undertaking reform in Egypt; but neither is happening in reality. Constitutional amendments in Egypt, intended to burnish the state's democratic image, have instead made it a laughingstock. The amendments provide for the creation of

an electoral commission about which no one knows anything except that it will be appointed by the all-powerful president. Elections are dominated by Mubarak's party and falsified by his security apparatus, which is not subject to any oversight or accountability. As for the argument that the amendments shift powers from the presidency to the parliament, one must remember that the parliament is dominated by members of Mubarak's party, who won their positions in fraudulent elections. How can they exercise any authority over the president if they owe their positions to him?

Among the supreme ironies of this process is the argument by Mubarak and his National Democratic Party (NDP) that it was necessary to amend Article 5 of the Constitution in order to prevent religion from dominating politics. In fact the NDP itself is the most backward and religiously inflexible of Egypt's parties, as demonstrated by its recent vicious campaign against Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni—himself a minister in the NDP government—because he expressed a negative view of women who wear the veil. It is also the party that insists on seeking out the opinions of religious scholars on the law for organ transplants, the passage of which the NDP has blocked. It is the party that most vigorously celebrates religious occasions and that inserted a constitutional article in 1980 naming Islamic law as the primary source of legislation in the country. It is a party that manipulates Muslim citizens' emotions exactly as the religious movement does and plays on Coptic Christians' fears to win their support. The NDP then turns around and deceives naive Americans with its prattle about prohibiting religiously based parties.

In fact, the NDP also does its best to prohibit new parties with a secular basis. The Shura Council's Political Parties Committee, dominated by the NDP, blocks the way for all new parties except for a trivial few that are led by unknowns, most of them lackeys of the security apparatus, and have little potential constituency. Although the change to a proportional representation system is supposed to improve the chances of opposition parties, one must ask how it is possible for any party to triumph over Mubarak if the committee that approves the establishment of new parties is controlled by Mubarak's party.

Regarding amended Article 179 and the prospect of replacing the state of emergency with a new anti-terrorism law, the reality is that Mubarak cannot survive in power a single moment without the protection of exceptional laws of some kind. With a new anti-terrorism law, Egypt will be like the shopkeeper who, upon finding that his customers do not like his merchandise, renames his shop but keeps selling the same old products.

President Mubarak has lived for some time in a virtual world—much like the main character in the American film *The Truman Show*—imagining himself to be presiding over political reform and economic growth. The difference between the Truman Show and the Mubarak Show, however, is that Truman did not know that everything around him was a fabrication whereas in Egypt, Mubarak is not only the main character but also the producer and the director of this charade—who nonetheless becomes very angry when we say that there is no reform. Egypt is falling into an abyss and we are continuing, with great energy, to dig deeper and deeper.

Ibrahim Eissa is the editor of the independent Egyptian daily al-Dustur. This article was translated from Arabic by Kevin Burnham.

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Syria: Elections without Politics

Omayma Abdel Latif

Apart from some posters and banners scattered across the streets of Damascus announcing elections on April 22-23, there are few signs in Syria of the sort of election fever seen in some Arab countries recently. Candidate posters are no more than a photo with a slogan underneath: "vote for the faithful son of Damascus" reads one poster; "vote for youthful talent and leadership" says another. Electoral platforms addressing real issues are conspicuously absent.

Syrians' lack of enthusiasm may be attributable to the fact that only one third of the 250 parliamentary seats are actually up for grabs. The other two thirds (167 seats) are automatically allocated to the Nationalist Progressive Front (NPF), a coalition of the Baath party and nine other parties that has ruled Syria since 1972. NPF candidates are selected for their loyalty to the party line and clean record with Syrian security services. The only real competition is among thousands of independent candidates for the remaining 83 seats. Independents have been allowed to run for parliament since 1990, a step that was intended to add a gloss of legitimacy and representation to the People's Assembly.

Independent candidates divide themselves into various lists, which do not necessarily reflect a division along ideological lines. The most prominent electoral list is al-Sham, which includes well-known figures in business, former MPs, and clergymen. Its platform focuses on unemployment and the rising costs of living. Mohei Eddin Haboush, a tourism mogul who has already served two terms in parliament, said of al-Sham: "We are not opposition and we are not from the NPF but we represent various trends in Syrian society." When asked about widespread criticisms of the parliament's marginal role in shaping the legislative agenda, Haboush blamed the media for failing to report accurately the role and activities of the assembly.

For most Syrians, however, the issue goes beyond underreporting the parliament's activities, as Haboush and other candidates claim. Popular political apathy results in voter turnouts between 4 and 10 percent, according to unofficial figures, reflecting deeply rooted popular distrust of the election process and doubt that the parliament plays any significant role. Even some NPF politicians share this popular perception. "The tasks assigned to the assembly are reduced to examining

draft laws submitted by the cabinet,” said Youssef al-Faisal, head of the Syrian Communist Party, one of the parties in the PNF alliance. “Most of the time,” he continued, “those laws are passed with hardly any modification, whatever remarks MPs might make during debate.” In fact, the Syrian constitution limits the powers of the assembly to reviewing cabinet statements and policies. The assembly statute allows up to ten deputies to propose draft laws during a legislative session, but deputies never make use of the privilege.

A few procedural changes were introduced to the election process this time. Transparent ballot boxes will be used for the first time, and campaign spending will be capped at three million Syrian Lira (US \$60,000) per candidate. For the most part, however, elections will be conducted as they have been in the past. There will be no judicial supervision; rather, each polling station will be supervised by three civil servants who pledge an oath before a judge. The electoral law stipulates that every governorate constitutes an electoral district except for Aleppo, which is divided into two districts. The two Aleppo districts have the largest representation in the 250-member assembly with a combined 32 seats, followed by Damascus with 29 seats. The law also stipulates that 50 percent of the assembly members should be workers and farmers.

The Syrian opposition is boycotting the elections, saying that the few changes to the electoral process fell far short of their longstanding demands. Led by the Syrian Democratic Coalition (SDC) and the Damascus Declaration bloc—an alliance of sixteen political parties—the opposition says it has a national project for democratic and peaceful change, including a new electoral law and the establishment of political parties. The opposition expects a broad popular boycott of the elections, despite a campaign by state media to get Syria’s eight million registered voters to the polls. “Unless there is a new political party law ending one-party rule in Syria, elections will simply remain a non-event and there will continue to be high levels of popular apathy,” said Hassan Abdel Azeem, head of the SDC and a former MP.

Omayma Abdel Latif is an Egyptian journalist and Projects Coordinator at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut.

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Jordan: Attention Turns to Electoral Law

David M. DeBartolo

Speculation was rife over the last several months that King Abdullah would exercise his constitutional prerogative to delay Jordan’s parliamentary elections, due to take place this year. Regional instability, Islamist governing parties in Iraq and Palestine, and discontent over Jordan’s rising inflation and subsidy cuts were cited as potential reasons. Major national organizations and figures, however, including the National Center for Human Rights and the Council of Professional Association Presidents, came out strongly against a delay. King Abdullah ended the speculation on March 2, and against the advice of some of his closest advisors, declared that the elections will be held this year.

With elections on the way, Jordan’s controversial electoral law is once more under scrutiny. Influential figures and organizations, including Islamic Action Front (IAF) Secretary-General Zaki Bani Irsheid and the Jordan Times, have called on the government to change the “one vote” law used in parliamentary elections since 1993. That system allows each voter one vote regardless of how many parliamentary seats represent the voter’s district. The system puts political parties at a disadvantage, as they effectively cannot run slates or lists of candidates in each district because voters only get one choice. The law therefore benefits independent candidates with strong personal or tribal connections to a significant number (but not necessarily a majority) of the district’s voters.

Opposition leaders have also called for more equal electoral representation. The number of voters per parliamentary seat varies wildly by district. Democracy Reporting International points out that “at its most extreme, there are nine times as many voters per parliamentary seat in Amman’s second district as there are in the sixth district of Karak.” The result is that although the two governorates of Amman and Irbid hold 57 percent of Jordan’s voting population, they have only 38 percent of the parliamentary seats. It is no coincidence that underrepresented urban governorates have a large population of Palestinian origin, and that overrepresented largely rural governorates are considered mainstays of support for the regime.

The Islamic Action Front, Jordan’s strongest and best-organized political party, has suggested replacing the one vote system with a mixed system. Under this proposal, half of the parliamentary seats would be allocated to national party lists through proportional representation, and the other half to single-member geographic districts. Each voter could cast two votes, one for a national list and the other for a district candidate. The proposal resembles the Palestinian electoral system used in 2006, though whereas Hamas fared disproportionately well in the multi-member geographic districts, polls show that the IAF would perform far better than other parties competing for proportional representation seats. A system with a proportional representation component appeals not only to the IAF, but also to some liberals and leftists, who see a chance to craft parties with national political programs that can ultimately compete with the IAF.

Opposition to overhauling the electoral law comes from the security services, parliamentarians elected from narrow tribal bases under the 2003 law, and some within the palace. Knowing that proportional representation would mean more Islamists in parliament, many within these groups want to see only superficial changes, such as adding a seat or two to the most underrepresented areas or allocating only 10 percent of parliamentary seats to be elected via proportional representation.

Jordan’s new political parties law, passed in March, revealed the nature of debate on such issues; parliamentarians proposed harsher conditions for parties than did the government. The new law raised from 50 to 500 the number of

members necessary for registering or maintaining party status and raised the minimum number of districts from which parties must draw their members. Existing parties that do not meet these requirements will be disbanded. The law will take effect after this year's parliamentary elections.

A coalition of parties, including the IAF, boycotted discussions with the government on the proposed political party law; there has even been talk of appealing the constitutionality of the law. Although the IAF would have no trouble meeting the new requirements, other parties would, and the IAF has come to realize that its prospects are brighter in a multi-party system. A vigorous IAF-liberal (or leftist) competition might relieve some of the pressure currently directed at the IAF from other Islamist sources. The IAF already receives a disproportionate amount of attention from Jordan's security services; if the IAF becomes the only opposition party, some fear the next step would be to abolish political parties altogether. Alternatively, the forced consolidation of small and weak parties could produce a strong party that contests the IAF's leading position.

Despite the ongoing discussions, few hold out hope for any major changes to the one vote system in the upcoming elections. The most optimistic reformists expect only superficial modifications. The parliament, whose 2007 regular session has already ended, is now in extraordinary session called by the king. Despite the opposition's demands, however, a new electoral law is not on the agenda. As a result, any changes to the electoral law will be issued by the government as a temporary law, without parliamentary debate or vote.

David M. DeBartolo is a Fulbright Fellow conducting research in Jordan and chair of the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), which recently launched its blog at blog.pomed.org.

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Mauritania: Beyond the Presidential Election

Azza Galal Hashim

In his first post-victory press conference Mauritanian President-elect Sidi Ould Sheikh Abdullahi called for a broadly inclusive national unity government. He will indeed need a great deal of support to face Mauritania's many political and economic challenges.

The Mauritanian elections, concluding in Abdullahi's second round victory on March 25, took on exceptional importance as the final step in the transitional phase the country has been in since the August 2005 overthrow of Ould Taya, who had held power since 1984. This transition included a new constitution issued in July 2006 that imposed a limit of two five-year terms for the president.

The resulting presidential election was distinguished by heated competition between ideologically distinct political forces as well as many independents, revealing the richness of the Mauritanian political arena. The elections also laid bare the division between two major camps nearly evenly dividing the political sphere. The first is that of the former regime, which supported President-elect Abdullahi, and the second consists of the former opposition forces, which stood behind the runner-up Ahmed Ould Dadah, an economist and brother of a former president. The first round's electoral results failed to give any of the nineteen candidates a winning majority, while the second round showdown between Abdullahi and Ahmed Ould Dadah ended with Abdullahi winning with 53 percent of the vote. Curiously, women did not play as prominent a role in the elections as they do in normal Mauritanian political life; two parties are headed by women and there are three female ministers in the current government.

Perhaps most encouraging was the high voter turnout: nearly 71 percent in the first round and 66 percent in the second, reflecting Mauritania's confidence in the electoral process. Mauritanian and European observers gave the elections high marks for fairness. The African Union, which had suspended Mauritania's membership after the 2005 coup, readmitted the country on April 12.

Although the election was the final stage in the transition from coup to democracy, challenges abound to consolidating the election's success. The most urgent of these is building a national consensus on the priorities of the upcoming period. Mauritania has long suffered from internal division, and the current climate of political liberalization could bring unproductive political chaos. There is also the challenge of rebuilding Mauritanian society by the standards of a modern state, as it is still ruled by tribalism, provincialism, and patronage. The army's political role will remain an essential issue; although the army handed over power to civilians, there will still be questions over how meaningful the handover is, and whether the army will stay on the sidelines or intervene once again. Above all, Mauritania faces staggering economic challenges; recent statistics suggest that more than two-thirds of the population live in poverty.

Also looming over the Mauritanian experiment are fears about the newly-elected leadership. Undoubtedly the most important concern is that Taya's regime could return to power via democratic practices—meaning not so much the return of individuals from the former regime, but rather its practices, such as poor governance and financial corruption. Such fears are legitimate, given that Abdullahi attained power with support from a pro-Taya coalition. But for now, the new president begins his term with a surge of local and international good will.

Azza Galal Hashim is an Egyptian scholar. This article was translated from Arabic by Paul Wulfsberg.

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Readers React

Florian Kohstall's article, "[Private Education and Reform in Egypt and Morocco](#)," (March 2007) gives the impression that the spread of private universities is a result of Western donor pressure and involves an attempt to implant foreign models. Actually, the spread of private colleges and universities is driven mostly by an indigenous elite demand for a higher quality education than crowded, strained, and struggling public universities can offer, without having to travel abroad. Many students and parents are attracted by instruction in English, better job prospects upon graduation, and pedagogical models that emphasize individual attention, critical thinking, and new subjects of study. To be sure, quality in the private sector varies widely, and the problem of limited access due to high cost is very real. Full autonomy is elusive in authoritarian settings. And the challenge of blending appealing features of foreign (often American) models into an education that is highly relevant to local values, language and needs is daunting, and one that new private universities must meet if they are to survive and flourish. Rather than reflecting the "international homogenization" of higher education, the proliferation of private universities in many Arab countries instead could be viewed as the necessary diversification of a sector that had been homogenized, in fact, by government control.

Amy Hawthorne

Director, International Center for Middle Eastern-Western Dialogue

Hossam Ezzedine's [article](#) (March 2007) explains well how Palestinian interfactional politics work. A debate is heating up in Palestine now over whether this government will be able to govern effectively or not. The Ministry of Health, controlled by Fatah, is a good example of how factionalism is ruling promotions and demotions. Other Fatah-controlled ministries are experiencing almost the same thing.

But with regard to ministries controlled by other factions or independents such as Salam Fayyad, Ziad Abu Amr, and Mustafa Barghouti, I believe they will govern based on the government program approved by the Palestinian Legislative Council and that professionalism will prevail. I disagree with Ezzedine's assessment that the knife of Fatah and Hamas will be at their throats, and believe these independents will overcome obstacles due to their previous experience of effective and transparent governance.

Mkhaimar Abusada, Ph.D.

Al-Azhar University, Gaza

It always seems to me that research centers such as yours misunderstand the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood does not belong to the political right or left because it is not a political movement and does not aspire to rule, but rather is a reform movement promoting reform in all its aspects. Furthermore, the political views of the Brotherhood are not arbitrary, nor do they arise in response to the political situation, but rather from the movement's principles. For example, some have wondered about the clarity of the Brotherhood's positions on certain issues (such as Coptic Christians, women's issues, and alternation of power) despite the fact that the Brotherhood has released statements explaining these views.

It is also unfair to consider the adoption of armed struggle by splinter groups of the Muslim Brotherhood as a black mark on the Brotherhood. In fact, the existence of these groups affirms the Brotherhood's rejection of extremism and their disagreement with these groups' understanding of Islam. The price paid by the Muslim Brothers—including imprisonment, confiscation of assets, and military trials—demonstrates that they do not strive to gain political posts or partisan goals. Indeed, which of today's political parties has sacrificed as the Muslim Brotherhood has?

Tamir Gamal Bayoumi

Egyptian Researcher

Translated from Arabic by Kevin Burnham

In his [reply](#) (March 2007) to my [article](#) (February 2007) on corruption and reform in the Arab World, Khalil Gebara says that fighting corruption in the Arab world should focus on democracy and political accountability. While promoting democracy is an imperative in the Arab world, it is unclear to what extent democracy enables or even is necessary for fighting corruption in the region. Even in consolidated western democracies such the United Kingdom and France, corruption occurs despite the presence of strong democratic institutions, as shown by the recent "money for honor" probe in the UK and Total probe in France. In the context of the Arab world, Lebanon and Palestine suffer from problems of corruption despite their relatively strong democratic features. Moreover, claims that democracy is necessary to fight corruption ignore the role of private sector—the supply side of corruption—in disseminating the problem. In sum, there is no single and universal solution that is both effective in fighting corruption and efficient in making the process of political and economic reforms rapid and applicable to all countries in the region. To come up with an effective policy response, a more refined analysis of each particular country is necessary.

Sufyan Alissa

Associate, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut

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News and Views

Egypt: Referendum Turnout Contested; Shura Elections Coming

Civil society and opposition groups are questioning reported voter turnout for a March 26 popular referendum on amendments to thirty-four articles of the 1970 Constitution. According to Justice Minister Mamdouh Marei, turnout was 27 percent of Egypt's 35 million registered voters with 76 percent of participants voting yes. Independent monitors place the turnout figure closer to 5 percent. Opposition groups boycotted the referendum on the amendments, which took place only a week after the amendments were approved by parliament in a single vote. The Judges Club accused the government of widespread fraud, including ballot box stuffing and vote buying. Click [here](#) for excerpts from the amendments in English and a full text in Arabic.

Parties in Egypt are gearing up for elections in June to fill eighty-eight seats in the upper house of parliament, the Shura Council. An additional forty-four members of the 264-seat council will be appointed by presidential decree. Opposition groups have boycotted previous Shura elections, but on April 14 the Muslim Brotherhood stated it intended to field twenty candidates. Elections will be held on a single day and supervised by an electoral commission rather than by judges, in compliance with the newly amended Article 88 of the constitution.

Following up on an amendment of Article 179 giving the president the authority to remand civilians suspected of terrorism offenses for trial in military courts, President Hosni Mubarak ordered the government to amend the military tribunals law to allow defendants the right of appeal. The proposed Supreme Military Appeals Court will be comprised of a board of five military judges headed by the chairman of the Military Justice Authority.

Approximately thirty members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested between April 12 and April 16, including students, businessmen, and leaders of the group, as well as blogger Abdul Monem Mahmoud.

Jordan: Press Law Amendments

Jordan's lower house of parliament endorsed on March 21 changes to the controversial press and publications law, abolishing clauses allowing imprisonment of journalists. The lower house had approved the draft law on March 4 but the upper house returned the law, recommending that imprisonment clauses be cancelled. Parliament replaced the provision with greater fines. Journalists operating in the kingdom could face fines of up to 28,000 dinars (US \$40,000) for violations relating to defaming religion, offending religious prophets, inciting sectarian strife or racism, slandering individuals, and spreading false information or rumors. Click [here](#) for details.

King Abdullah announced on March 2 that parliamentary elections will take place by the end of 2007, ending speculation that he would delay elections until next year. Parliament's four-year term ends in April.

Syria: Activists' Trials Postponed

The trial of political rights activist Kamal al-Labwani was postponed again on April 10, provoking charges that Syria was keeping the 30-month detainee in a legal limbo. The First Damascus Criminal Court adjourned the case to May because a new judge was appointed. Labwani, detained in November 2005 upon his return from a two-month trip to Europe and the United States where he met with government officials, journalists, and human rights organizations, has been charged with weakening national sentiment, damaging the nation's image, spreading false or exaggerated information, and communicating with a foreign country to incite aggression against Syria. Click [here](#) for details. Two other political activists in Syria, Michel Kilo and Anwar al-Bunni, have been detained since May 2006 with repeated postponements of their trials after they signed the Beirut-Damascus joint statement. Kilo faces charges punishable by at least three years in prison including weakening national sentiment, spreading false information, and inciting religious and racial dissension. Click [here](#) for details.

Qatar: Municipal Elections

Elections to Qatar's twenty-nine-member Central Municipal Council, an advisory body created in 1999 that issues recommendations on municipal issues, were held on April 1. One hundred and twenty-five candidates ran and 51 percent of the 28,000 eligible voters cast ballots, compared to 32 percent who participated in the 2003 election. The election is seen as a precursor to parliamentary elections for the country's first national legislature, expected later this year. Qatar's constitution, approved in an April 2003 popular referendum, creates a legislative body with thirty members elected by universal suffrage and fifteen appointed by the emir. Elections were initially planned for mid-2005 but postponed due to alleged problems with the voter lists. Currently Qatar only has an appointed council with a limited advisory role.

Kuwait: New Government

Kuwait's emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah approved a new sixteen-member cabinet on March 25, after the previous government resigned on March 4 in a move observers believe was aimed at avoiding a no-confidence motion against Health Minister Sheikh Ahmed Al Abdullah Al Sabah. Ten members of parliament presented the motion in February over suspected financial and administrative breaches at the ministry. The reshuffle replaced the minister, but key portfolios — foreign affairs, defense, interior, labor and social affairs, and oil — remain unchanged. They are headed by members of the ruling Sabah family.

UAE: New Labor Law

The UAE's Labor Ministry proposed a draft labor law ([Arabic text of law](#)) which according to a March 25 [report](#) by Human Rights Watch, falls short of international standards for workers' rights. The report calls for the law to be revised to protect workers' rights to organize, bargain collectively and strike, and to cover excluded groups such as domestic workers. In addition, the draft law includes a number of provisions that discriminate against women workers.

Algeria: Court Acquits Journalists

An Algiers appeals court ruled on April 4 to give two journalists suspended sentences of six months in prison and a fine of 50,000 dinars (about US \$ 720), effectively concluding the libel suit brought by Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi in October 2006 against Ali Fodil, the editor of the Arabic-language daily *Ech-Chourouk*, and Naila Berrahal, one of his journalists, over reports published two months earlier which allegedly "attacked his person, the Libyan state and the security of the Algerian and Libyan states." Click [here](#) for details.

The State Security court sentenced eight members of the banned Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to jail terms of up to 10 years, according to a March 5 statement by the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria. The members were arrested in early 2004 and charged with having ties with the group and possession of banned books and tapes. Syrian authorities did not confirm the sentences.

Libya: Call for Free Press

Libyan journalists and writers inside and outside the country issued a statement on April 2 urging the Libyan government to allow free and privately-owned press, after the government announced the formation of a committee to study the status of the Libyan press. Click [here](#) for details.

Morocco: Draft Press Law under Discussion

A draft press law under discussion among journalists and the government would keep criminal penalties in place for journalists charged with violating bans against offending the monarchy, Islam, and state institutions such as the army and judiciary. The new draft law also stipulates the creation of a National Press Council whose 15 members would be appointed by the king and journalists. Click [here](#) for details.

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Upcoming Political Events

- Syria: Legislative Elections, April 22, 2007; Presidential Referendum, May 2007; Municipal Elections, August 2007.
- Algeria: Legislative Elections, May 17, 2007.
- Egypt: Shura Council Elections, June 2007.
- Jordan: Municipal Elections, July 2007 ; Legislative Elections, 2007 (date to be determined).
- Morocco: Legislative Elections, September 2007.
- Oman: Shura Council Elections, October 2007.
- Qatar: Legislative Elections, 2007 (date to be determined).

Views from the Arab Media

The Islamic Action Front should not be blamed for being the only political party in Jordan capable of winning a large number of seats in the upcoming parliamentary elections, argues Ayman Safadi in an April 7 opinion [article](#) in Jordan's *al-Ghad*. Rather, the blame for this lopsided political scene lies with political party leaders who have failed to operate beyond localized patronage politics and with the government, which has failed to encourage political party life and amend the flawed electoral law. Maher Abu Tayr disagrees in an April 8 opinion [article](#) in Jordan's *Adustour* and argues that political parties do not have the right to complain about legislation because they alone are to blame for their inability to organize. Furthermore, many have connections with outside forces that damage Jordan's national interest.

Rhetorical support for democracy by a majority of Arab citizens—as revealed in public opinion polls in many Arab countries—is misleading, argues Muhammad Abu Rumman in an [article](#) in *al-Ghad* on April 4. Only when groups start believing that democracy is tied to socio-economic well being and start rallying for civil and political freedoms as vocally as they do for nationalist and Islamist causes will the structures of authoritarianism begin to erode.

This year's wave of elections and referenda in the Arab world may create the incorrect impression that all is well with the political process in these countries, according to an April 7 [op-ed](#) in *al-Hayat* by Majid Kilali. Democratization is about far more than elections and involves respect for human rights and civil and political liberties, enforcing the rule of law, and ensuring the separation of powers, none of which is being promoted in Arab countries.

Al Jazeera's "[al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis](#)" (The Opposite Direction) featured a debate about liberal Islam on March 27. Gamal al-Banna, Islamist intellectual and brother of the Muslim Brotherhood's founder, called for the reform of Islam and the separation of religion and authority and blamed salafism for the stagnation of the Muslim world. Mohamed Ibrahim Mabrouk accused Al Banna and other proponents of liberal Islam of being collaborators in an American campaign against Islam.

On the fourth anniversary of the fall of Baghdad, Iraq is living the worst times in history, argues an April 10 [editorial](#) in *al-Quds al-Arabi*. The lack of security and public services and the presence of death squads have transformed a country that once represented stability and cultural and scientific creativity in the entire region into a base for exporting terrorism and extremism. Abdul Rahman Rashed disagrees in an [article](#) in *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* on April 10 on the grounds that the seeds of Iraq's crisis were sown during Saddam Hussein's rule and merely brought to fruition by the U.S. invasion, which accelerated the collapse of a regime that would have eventually fallen on its own.

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Read On

Several recent publications highlight developments in **Egypt**:

- Egyptian authorities are committing systematic abuses of human rights in the name of national security and a planned anti-terrorism law could make the situation worse, according to an Amnesty International report ("[Egypt: Planned Anti-Terror Law Could Intensify Abuses](#)," April 11, 2007).
- Capitalizing on Washington's concern about the rise of Islamist movements throughout the Arab world, the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes are backtracking on domestic political reform, contends Jeffrey Azarva in "[Reneging on Reform: Egypt and Tunisia](#)" (American Enterprise Institute, Middle Eastern Outlook no. 2, April 2007).
- In "[Democracy Demotion in Egypt: Is the United States a Willing Accomplice?](#)," Andrew Exum and Zack Snyder argue that Washington's tepid response to Egypt's constitutional amendments is further evidence that the Bush administration has abandoned its democracy promotion agenda in the Middle East (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch no. 1212, March 23, 2007).
- While recent amendments to Egypt's constitution appear to increase the balance among branches of government and offer greater opportunities to political parties, they also undermine human rights protections and block the way for the country's principal opposition group (Nathan Brown, Michele Dunne, and Amr Hamzawy, "[Egypt's Controversial Constitutional Amendments](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Web Commentary, March 23, 2007).
- Increasingly aware of the connection between their socio-economic conditions and the Egyptian regime's political and economic policies, public-sector workers are well-positioned to play a role if they can organize themselves on a national basis, argue Joel Beinin and Hossam El-Hamalawy in "[Egyptian Textile Workers Confront the New Economic Order](#)" (*Middle East Report Online*, March 25, 2007).
- The Egyptian military's buildup goes beyond its stated objectives of deterrence and raises questions about Egypt's intention to change the military status quo vis-à-vis Israel, warns Jeffrey Azarva in "[From Cold Peace to Cold War? The Significance of Egypt's Military Buildup](#)" (*Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 1, March 2007, 59-73).
- Economic and political gains from the Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ) Agreement will be limited, argues Vikash Yadav in "[The Political Economy of the Egyptian-Israeli QIZ Trade Agreement](#)" (*Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 1 (March 2007), 74-96).

Recent publications focus on **Iraq**:

- The United States' inability to reconstruct Iraq's state capacity lies at the heart of the Iraq debacle, contends Toby Dodge in "The Causes of US Failure in Iraq" (*Survival*, vol. 49, no. 1, Spring 2007, 85-106).
- The insurgency in Iraq has evolved from a struggle between Coalition forces and former regime loyalists to a diffuse mix of sectarian and ethnic violence that threatens to divide the country and lead to the forced relocation of many Iraqis (Anthony Cordesman, "**Iraq's Sectarian and Ethnic Violence and its Evolving Insurgency**," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2, 2007).
- The March 2007 issue of *Strategic Insights* is a special edition addressing many of the key issues identified in The Iraq Study Group Report, including regional security, the regional power balance, and sectarianism.

New publications on reform-related developments in other Arab countries include:

- Ahead of the May 17 parliamentary elections, Democracy Reporting International has carried out a comprehensive assessment for elections in **Algeria**. The report (**French**, **Arabic**, summary in **English**) concludes that the framework for elections in Algeria needs to be substantially improved in order to increase the transparency of the process and public confidence in the electoral administration.
- The **Tunisian** government has failed to make progress in improving free expression conditions over the past year according to the International Freedom of Information Exchange Tunisia Monitoring Group's (TMG) fourth major report, published in **English**, **French**, and **Arabic** (April 12, 2007).
- Looking at the cases of **Jordan**, **Syria**, and **Kuwait**, Pete W. Moore and Bassel F. Salloukh contend that professional associations provide a useful conceptual tool in analyzing change in authoritarian state-society relations (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, February 2007, 53-76).
- The overwhelming parliamentary endorsement of the **Palestinian** unity government belies the many internal and cross-factional tensions that will ultimately undercut the current Fatah-Hamas alliance, argues Mohammad Yaghi in "**How Long Can the Palestinian Unity Government Last?**" (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch no. 1219, April 4, 2007).
- The image of Hizballah as a client of Iran and Syria has become obsolete due to the power base the Shi'i group has nurtured and expanded in Lebanon and the growing political capital it has acquired in the Middle East, argues Emile El-Hokayem in "**Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship**" (*Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2, Spring 2007, 35-52).

Publications addressing region-wide political developments include:

- Steven A. Cook's ***Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey*** demonstrates the critical role that the military plays in regime stability and the maintenance of a democratic facade in authoritarian regimes (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).
- The Spring 2007 issue of ***Middle East Report*** is a special edition on Shi'a in the Arab World. Topics covered include the status of Shi'a in Saudi Arabia (Toby Jones) and family law reform in Bahrain (Sandy Russell Jones).
- In ***Building Moderate Muslim Networks***, Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Bernard, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Peter Sickle develop a framework for capitalizing on the experience of the United States in fostering democratic networks during the Cold War to develop moderate Muslim networks (Rand Corporation, 2007).
- ***Marsad al-Islah al-Arabi: al-Ishkaliat wal-Mu'ashirat*** (Arab Reform Watch: Problems and Indicators), published by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, explores the ways in which general indicators for political, economic, and social reform across the Arab world could be devised in view of the particularities of each country (al- Sayyid Yassin, and Muhammad Youssef, 2006).
- The April 2007 issue of ***Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi***, published by the Beirut-based Center for Arab Unity Studies, includes analysis of the challenges faced by civil society organizations in the Arab world, of how Arab thinkers can

circumvent perceived contradictions between Islam and democratic forms of government. Click [here](#) for a table of contents in Arabic.

- In "Survival of the Fattest: Democracy and Development in Oil States," Paul Collier explores the recent spread of democracy to oil economies and that of oil to some democracies (*The American Interest*, May-June 2007).

Transliteration note: Beginning with this issue, the *Arab Reform Bulletin* will change the system by which Arabic words are transliterated. Among other changes, the definite article will henceforth be rendered as *al-* rather than *Al*.

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