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BELARUS

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cited Belarus as the last remaining dictatorship in Europe and suggested that the 2006 presidential election offers Belarusian dissidents an opportunity for political change. In meetings with Secretary Rice, representatives of Belarusian civil society described the challenges they face as President Lukashenko continues to restrict political freedoms. Thirty people received short jail sentences for participating in an anti-Lukashenko rally in April and several prominent opposition figures have disappeared under suspicious circumstances. In a recent state of the nation address, President Lukashenko warned he would take firm action against countries and groups he suspected of trying to undermine him.

ECUADOR

In April, Ecuador's president, Lucio Gutierrez, was ousted by violent popular protests and became the third Ecuadorian president to be sacked in eight years. Among other things, Gutierrez has been accused of stacking the Supreme Court, which recently dropped corruption charges against a Gutierrez ally. The new president, former vice president Alfredo Palacio, has dismissed calls for early elections, insisting that he will serve out his predecessor's term. Palacio promises to hold an assembly to pass reforms to Ecuador's electoral, legislative and judicial systems. Ecuadorian polls are split about Palacio's decision while the OAS has called for urgent national dialogue.

EGYPT

Last February, President Hosni Mubarak called on the Egyptian Parliament to make constitutional changes allowing multi-candidate elections, and political actors are beginning to argue over the shape of such elections. In advance of the September polls, USAID granted \$1 million to six civil society groups in its

first political development grants to Egypt. While religious and political leaders have strongly protested the grants, suggesting that accepting foreign funding would soon be criminalized, Egyptian judges have suggested that they might refuse to supervise the elections unless they were given independent control over all aspects of the poll. Meanwhile, Egypt's fledgling reform movement—known by its catchphrase, “Kifaya,” or “enough”—attempted to stage demonstrations across Egypt at the end of April.

KYRGYZSTAN

See David Mikosz's article in *Elections Today* for an update on Kyrgyzstan's recent election and civil society response.

LEBANON

Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri and the resulting protests that toppled the Lebanese government and forced Syria to withdraw its 14,000 troops, Lebanon plans to hold parliamentary elections at the end of May. Saad al-Hariri, son of the slain leader, has announced his candidacy, and popular sympathy along with his family's wealth and political connections promise to make him a strong contender. Christian leaders have voiced strong concerns that the current electoral law may underrepresent them.

MOLDOVA

See interviews with John Todd Stewart, Igor Botan and Angela Sirbu in *Elections Today* for an update on Moldova's recent election.

MYANMAR

Myanmar is set to assume the ASEAN chairmanship in 2006, spurring criticism from the United Nations and threats of ASEAN meeting boycotts from the United States and the European Union. In accordance with a 2003 pledge (made by an earlier prime minister) to follow a seven-step road map to democracy (that in-



(clockwise from top left): Lebanese protest Syria's presence in March; Myanmar citizen living in Tokyo protests visit of Myanmar's Prime Minister; a policeman in Nepal stands in front of a poster of King Gyanendra; a Togolese soldier in front of opposition graffiti; a protester at an anti-government rally in Belarus.

cludes freeing political dissidents and drafting a new constitution), Myanmar is currently rewriting its constitution. However, the international community has expressed doubts about Myanmar's commitment to reform and fears that it will not allow the main opposition party, led by Aung San Suu Kyi (who remains under house arrest), to participate.

NEPAL

The state of emergency in Nepal was lifted in early May (over three months after King Gyanendra imposed it), but human rights groups say thousands of politicians and activists are still in custody. Though the government released some 500 detainees in April and set municipal elections for sometime in the next 12 months, the international community and human rights groups continue calling on the king to fully restore democracy and civil liberties. The king's supporters argue that peace is necessary before democracy is possible and that the nine-year Maoist

revolt—which has killed more than 11,000 and displaced some 200,000 people—necessitated the action. The government insists that, unlike past polls, the coming elections will be free and fair. Opposition parties have announced a series of peaceful protests for the end of May.

Togo

Togo's April 24 presidential elections have provoked charges of electoral fraud, violence, and the exodus of 12,000 refugees into neighboring countries. Faure Gnassingbe, the son of Togo's late leader, is said to have won 60% of the vote, but the opposition, a coalition of six parties that have also declared victory, charges the elections were fixed. Togo moved forward with elections despite strong caution from international NGOs, whose pre-election assessment found that 'serious obstacles' must be overcome for the election to be considered credible. An EU investigation has found "presumptive evidence of massive fraud."