

DEMOCRATIC FACADES OR CATALYSTS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION

# DO ELECTIONS IN THE ARAB WORLD MATTER?

by Amy Hawthorne



The Arab world's "democracy deficit," long a low priority in United States and European policy toward the Middle East, is receiving heightened attention as a potential focus of the war on terrorism. While some commentators have cast the region as isolated from global trends in democratization, many Arab countries have in fact taken halting steps toward political liberalization during the last decade or so. Most are now better characterized as liberalized autocracies than as despotic systems.

frustrated by economic crises and exclusionary politics. Others, for example in Qatar, announced elections amidst prosperity to solidify their popular appeal. Unified North and South Yemen and the Palestinian Authority held pluralist elections as a part of state building.

## POSITIVE CHANGES

Multiparty elections have been a key vehicle for the expression of ideological diversity, which was for many years severely curtailed in the Arab political sphere. This emerging pluralism is evident in the phenomenon of new Arab media, such as the satellite channel *Al Jazeera*.

Elections have been a locus of burgeoning human rights and democracy activity. Arab non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have launched programs for voter education, election

The holding of contested multiparty (or, where parties are still illegal, "pluralist") elections for parliament, local government and occasionally for president has been a prominent part of this liberalization. In 1987, only Egypt held multiparty elections. Fifteen years later, ten Arab states plus the Palestinian territories have convened them (only Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates permit no elections whatsoever). While these elections range in competitiveness, they share features that illustrate both the progress and the limits of liberalization.

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## VARIED CONTEXTS

In countries that had maintained one-party states since independence, such as Algeria, the legalization of opposition parties was an innovation. Elsewhere, as in Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain and Lebanon, the convening of multiparty elections resurrected an earlier process abandoned during a period of repression or conflict. Factors prompting the loosening of electoral controls have likewise varied. Most leaders sought to mollify publics

monitoring and electoral reform. The operating environment remains precarious, but, all the same, in most countries such activities would have been unthinkable 15 years ago.

Elections have also provided a forum for modest advances in women's political participation. Arab women now have full suffrage everywhere except Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In some Gulf countries, suffrage came only a few years

ago; elsewhere, women have had the right to vote for decades, but the recent trend toward more pluralist elections has made their participation somewhat more meaningful. Arab women are woefully underrepresented in elected office, and female candidates are few. But women have competed in nearly every election of the last decade, and in some countries women's voting rates rival men's.

World Wide Web debuts, popularizes Internet.

October: East and West Germany reunited.

January: Yugoslav Communists end 45-year monopoly of power.

February: Soviet Communists relinquish sole power.

February: South Africa frees Nelson Mandela, imprisoned 27 and a half years.

August: Iraqi troops invade Kuwait and seize petroleum reserves, setting off Persian Gulf War.



December: Lech Walesa wins Poland's runoff presidential election.



## 1990

IFES undertakes first civil society project, mobilizing 2,500 volunteers for a door-to-door voter registration campaign in Nicaragua.

IFES opens its first field office, in Haiti, providing commodity and training assistance to the Provisional Election Council of Haiti ahead of the country's first-ever free and fair elections.



IFES organizes the InterAmerican Electoral Systems Conference in Caracas, Venezuela, the first meeting of election officials from all across the Americas.



Finally, holding even nominally competitive and open elections introduces the principle, if not yet the reality, of citizens' rights to political representation and participation.

## PRESERVATION OF THE STATUS QUO

These positive changes, however, are far outweighed by the fact that elections have not led to fundamental changes in the exercise of political power. Competition remains within parameters that do not threaten regime prerogatives. Indeed, the overriding objective has been regime preservation, not democratization. Rulers wagered that allowing a greater measure of participation would enhance their legitimacy as they launched unpopular economic reform programs; would give new personalities a role in debating policy, and thus spread responsibility for governance; and would co-opt or marginalize Islamists, the leading opposition force. A desire for international approbation has played a role, too.

Generally poor opposition showings and the weakness of elected institutions have led to charges that these elections are "facades" that have the formal trappings of democracy, but little of the substance.

Ruling parties and their supporters have swept almost every electoral contest of the last 15 years, typically with majorities exceeding 75 percent. Only a handful of times have opposition candidates, led by Islamists, won a plurality in national elections. Such "victories" are usually fleeting. For instance, after Islamist candidates won 40 percent of seats in Jordan's 1989 parliamentary elections, the government issued a new electoral law that diminished Islamist prospects in subsequent contests. In Algeria, after an Islamist party dominated the first round of relatively competitive elections in 1991 and was poised to win the second, the military staged a coup and annulled the electoral process, setting off years of civil conflict. So far, only Morocco's 1997 parliamentary elections have led to the formation of an opposition-led government. The country's 2002 contest will demonstrate if this is a genuine opening or an anomaly.

Several factors explain the poor opposition performances. The non-Islamist opposition—mostly secular, leftist parties—lacks grassroots support. Islamists are more popular, and

face more repression. Where the leading Islamist parties compete legally, as in Jordan, Yemen and Lebanon, legal and administrative measures constrain their electoral prospects. Elsewhere, the major Islamist forces are banned (as in Morocco) or, as in Egypt, can field only independent candidates. More broadly, severe limits on political liberties, especially freedom of association and expression, hinder popular mobilization. One sign of the weak appeal of official party politics is the large number of independent candidates in most elections.

Ruling parties enjoy extensive patronage networks and superior access to the national media, and control the rules and infrastructure of the electoral game. The winner-take-all system used in most countries benefits incumbent parties. Powerful ministries of interior administer voter and candidate registration, balloting and counting, with little transparency or accountability. To date, only Yemen has a permanent independent electoral commission.

Incremental changes that make elections more meaningful and introduce limited power sharing could soften the 'hard landing' that many fear will ensue if political systems are opened up precipitously.

Furthermore, while parliaments and local councils can be important venues for debate, they lack the ability to control resources, shape key policies and check the executive branch, which remains supreme in

monarchies and republics. Even so, many governments have appointed supporters to upper houses to "compensate" for an opposition presence in the lower, elected house. The marginality of elected institutions to real decision-making leads to voter apathy. Some analysts estimated the turnout in Algeria's May 2002 legislative elections, for instance, at less than 30 percent.

## LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

Can multiparty elections in the Arab world help create a path toward a genuine democratic evolution? The role of elections in three countries exemplifying the "gradual transition" model of democratization—Mexico, Taiwan and South Korea—is instructive in a double-edged sense. In each, opposition forces struggled through a decade or more of flawed but semi-competitive elections to expand their influence. Gaining clout, they pressed for electoral reforms, which led to a series of increasingly competitive elections. These elections culminated in the peaceful transfer of executive power to a victorious opposition candidate. These transitions happened

June: Communist government of Albania resigns.

June: South African Parliament repeals apartheid laws.

July: Warsaw Pact dissolved.

July: Boris N. Yeltsin inaugurated as first freely elected president of Russian Republic.



August: Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia win independence.



December: Soviet Union breaks up after President Gorbachev's resignation; constituent republics form Commonwealth of Independent States.

### 1991

IFES signs a five-year, \$7 million cooperative agreement with USAID.

In a 13-month period, IFES carries out pre-election technical assessments in 16 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

IFES begins its first long-term project in Africa, helping to organize legislative, presidential and municipal elections in Mali.

IFES hosts a conference in Budapest, Hungary, to establish the ACEEEO.

IFES provides technical support and organizes US observer team for Nepal's first multiparty parliamentary elections since 1959.

IFES establishes its Resource Center on elections. Following Mr. White's death in 1993, the Center is rededicated as the F. Clifton White Resource Center.

in the context of an overall economic and political dynamism, which fed popular demands for change, bolstered opposition forces and eventually led national leaders to take risks for democracy.

By contrast, the Arab world is struggling economically and its most forward-thinking leaders appear ambivalent about democratization. Yet a path of gradual adjustment is clearly more appealing than abrupt, possibly violent, change. Incremental changes that make elections more meaningful and introduce limited power sharing could soften the "hard landing" that many fear will ensue if political systems are opened up precipitously. A sequence of reforms could include establishing independent, pluralist electoral commissions; strengthening the judiciary's role in the electoral process; granting elected institutions greater powers; and lifting controls on political activity, especially for parties.

While the desire for change must emanate from Arabs themselves, the international community, and in particular the United States, has a role to play in encouraging difficult steps and informed decisions. Here, the expertise of organizations like IFES can make an important contribution.

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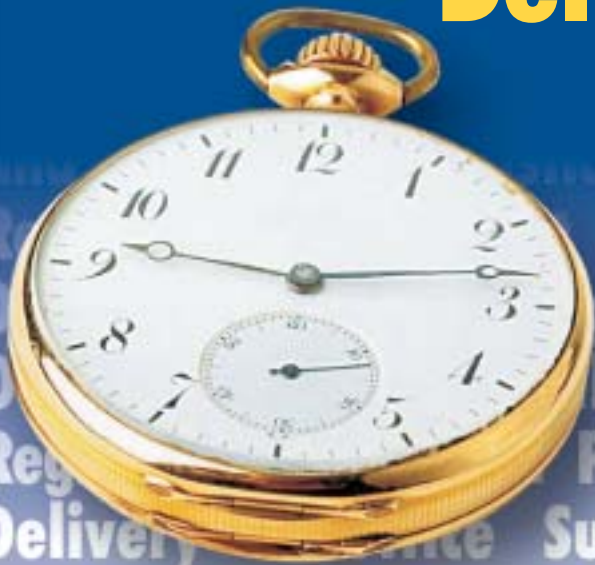
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