

Arab Reform Bulletin

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In this Issue:

Insights and Analysis

Egypt's Ruling Party Conference: The More It Seems to Change, the More It Stays Almost the Same *By Dina Shehata*
Opposition Politics in Egypt: A Fleeting Moment of Opportunity? *By Samer Shehata*
Iraq's Insurgents: What Do They Want? *By Judith S. Yaphe*
Arab Judicial Reform: Bold Visions, Few Achievements *By Nathan J. Brown*

News and Views

Egypt Rejects New Political Parties, Again
Palestinians Register to Vote
Saudi Arabia: Elections Delayed; Government Employees Silenced
The United States Declares Saudi Arabia a Violator of Religious Freedom
Jordanian Government Arrests Nine Muslim Brothers
Narrowing Political Space in Bahrain
Preparations for "Forum for the Future" Rekindle Past Controversy
Middle East Reform in the U.S. Presidential Campaign

Views from the Arab Press: Reform in Egypt

Read On

New writings on reform in the Gulf, Palestinian governance, and integrating democracy promotion into U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

Subscriber Information

Insights and Analysis

Egypt's Ruling Party Conference: The More It Seems to Change, the More It Stays Almost the Same

By Dina Shehata

The September 21-23 conference of Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) was notable in several respects. First, the proceedings were dominated by Gamal Mubarak, President Hosni Mubarak's 41-year-old son who heads the NDP's powerful policies secretariat, keeping alive rumors that he is being groomed to succeed his father. Second, the presence of some sixty invited foreign observers suggested the government's growing sensitivity to its image abroad. Third, the event made clear that the conference slogan "New Thinking and the Priorities of Reform" refers to economic, not political, reform.

After five years of inertia on economic reform, the Mubarak regime recently has revived its "economics first" mantra of the 1990s. The younger, technocratic economic liberals brought into the cabinet in a July reshuffle announced at the conference bold plans to revive the dormant privatization program, slash tariffs and taxes, and reform the banking system. The NDP's clear message was that expanding the private sector, shrinking the role of the state, and attracting foreign investment would be the only path to fixing Egypt's deeply troubled economy.

By contrast, the package of political reforms unveiled at the conference was timid. The party leadership rejected opposition demands for a constitutional amendment to allow direct competitive presidential elections in 2005 and to impose term limits, for an end to the 23-year state of emergency, and for the lifting of controls on political parties and civil society organizations in advance of the parliamentary elections scheduled for next year. It also rebuffed calls to legalize the Muslim Brotherhood. Instead, NDP officials proposed modest amendments to the political party law, the election law, and the professional syndicates law. Party leaders asserted that such reforms aim to broaden popular participation and civic freedoms and to strengthen political parties and non-governmental organizations in a process that is evolutionary, not revolutionary.

A proposed amendment to the political parties law would add three non-partisan public figures to the committee that licenses and oversees parties; at present, it is composed almost entirely of government officials. The committee will hardly be a neutral arbiter, however—its members will be chosen by President Mubarak, and Safwat Sherif, NDP chairman and former minister of information, will remain as its head. The committee will also retain the power to reject the legalization of new parties on the basis of vague criteria such as that the party's program does not "constitute an addition to public life." The proposed amendments to the political participation law would establish a higher elections commission headed by the Minister of Justice and including a representative of the Ministry of Interior and five nonpartisan public figures. The commission is tasked with modernizing the voters' registry, drawing electoral districts, regulating election campaigns, and announcing results. However, the NDP rejected the opposition's call to revise the flawed voters' register before next year's vote.

Finally, the NDP proposed amending the law governing professional syndicates, leading sites of political activism in Egypt. The current law stipulates that if a syndicate's elections fail to attract more than 50 percent of the membership (or 30 percent in a second round), the leadership must step down after three months and the syndicate must be placed under judicial supervision until valid elections can be held. (This measure was adopted in 1993 to curb the rising influence of the Muslim Brotherhood after its candidates gained control of the influential doctors' and engineers' syndicates through elections with very small turnouts. It prevented several syndicates from electing new leadership for almost ten years). The revised law would allow the existing leadership to remain in place until valid elections are held, and would reduce the quorum to 30 percent (or 20 percent in a second round) for elections on the local level—but not for those on the governorate and national levels, which may prevent many syndicates from holding valid elections.

The proposed laws would constitute the first reforms of Egypt's political laws after a decade during which the regime constricted rights and participation. The ruling party has implicitly acknowledged that the political system needs upgrading, and that the party itself needs to burnish its image in advance of the 2005 parliamentary elections. However, the measures are essentially cosmetic because they would not restrict the overwhelming powers of the executive branch or expand political competition.

The outcome of the NDP conference was hardly a surprise. Although in the past two years opposition groups have become bolder in their criticism of the regime and more ambitious in their demands, they remain weak and isolated. For the ruling party, they are irrelevant. Furthermore, external pressure for political change has proved to be erratic, and the government seems to have deflected it by making promises in the economic reform and foreign policy arenas—in the latter, by proposing to take on a major security role in Gaza after a potential Israeli withdrawal in 2005. The conference demonstrated that while the ruling party is willing to talk of political reform, it intends to maintain firm control over the nature and the pace of change.

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Opposition Politics in Egypt: A Fleeting Moment of Opportunity?

By Samer Shehata

In Egypt, the approaching 2005 presidential referendum and parliamentary elections as well as the likelihood that a leadership succession will take place within the next few years—President Hosni Mubarak is seventy-six and was hospitalized in Germany this summer—have energized politics and led to fresh efforts at cooperation among opposition groups. Pressure from Washington, the international discourse about Arab political reform, and growing public frustration at the continuing domestic economic crisis and boiling regional conflicts in Iraq and the Palestinian territories have also convinced the Egyptian opposition that the time is ripe to push for a restructuring of the rules of the political game.

Last month, the country's three main legal opposition parties—the right-of-center Wafd Party, the left-wing National Progressive Unionist Party (the Tagammu Party), and the leftist Arab Nasserist Party—joined with the Islamist Labor Party, which has not been allowed to operate or to publish its newspaper since 2000, in an "Alliance of National Forces for Reform." The Alliance presented its agenda on September 21 to coincide with the annual conference of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP).

The Alliance is calling for six main reforms: (1) an end to the emergency law which has been in effect since President Anwar Al Sadat's assassination in 1981; (2) a constitutional amendment to allow direct election of the president from among competing candidates and to impose a limit of two 5-year presidential terms; (3) the guarantee of free elections under judicial supervision; (4) greater freedom to establish political parties; (5) loosening of government controls over unions, syndicates and civil society groups; and (6) an end to the ruling party's dominance of state media.

The three main parties have also reached an "agreement" (*tawafuq*, as opposed to *tahaluf*, which is a more formal pact) with the illegal but powerful Muslim Brotherhood on the most important elements of reform. According to the General Secretary of the Wafd Party, Al Sayid Al Badawi, these are constitutional, administrative and legal reform, the establishment of an independent electoral commission, and changes in the laws governing political parties and elections.

A second opposition coalition—made up of civil society groups such as the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, banned organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party, and independent intellectuals—has also formed. This coalition, calling itself the March 20th Movement for Change (in reference to the date of large protests held in Cairo against the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq), goes further than the Alliance by calling on President Mubarak not to seek a fifth term and by rejecting the prospect that Gamal Mubarak, the president's younger son, would "inherit" power. The groups in the March 20th Movement are also more radical than those in the Alliance and less constrained by the rules that govern legal party politics.

Cooperation between secular and Islamist forces in Egypt is hardly new; the Wafd formed an electoral alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. But the number and ideological diversity of organizations that are currently mobilizing around a core set of demands is a noteworthy development and illustrate a growing frustration with the status quo that spans the political spectrum. Yet, the recent initiatives are unlikely to produce concrete results. Egypt's opposition parties remain structurally weak and are plagued by aging leadership, a history of infighting, and petty personal politics. The Wafd, Tagammu, and Arab Nasserist parties lack large constituencies and the ability to build popular support; what little influence they do possess comes primarily from the limited-circulation newspapers they publish. Unlike the banned Muslim Brotherhood, these parties lack the ability to mobilize tens of thousands of Egyptians onto the nation's streets.

The emergency law has also stunted the development of parties and of the nation's political life more generally. The law prohibits parties from holding rallies without prior permission, which is rarely granted, and gives the security forces vast and unchecked powers to arrest and detain individuals. The law also prohibits strikes and demonstrations and gives the government powers to censor and shut down newspapers—actions it has not hesitated to take.

The outcome of the NDP's recent conference, which essentially dismissed the opposition's reform agenda out of hand, makes clear that the Egyptian government is not interested in implementing measures that would fundamentally change the character of Egyptian politics. The moment of opportunity that has led opposition forces to become bolder in their demands and attempt to band together may very well prove fleeting.

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Iraq's Insurgents: What Do They Want?

By Judith S. Yaphe

Iraq's insurgencies began with the U.S. military invasion in March 2003 and gained momentum after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime when the United States moved to dissolve the Iraqi military and implement a sweeping de-Baathification policy. This convinced many Iraqis—particularly Sunni Arabs—that they were about to become victims rather than participants in the post-Saddam order. It drove them to join other disgruntled Iraqis in a fight to retain local power and destabilize the new central government.

Iraq has no shortage of weapons and people well trained in their use who are determined to wreak havoc on the occupiers and on Iraqis believed to support them. Porous borders, poor local security, and political disarray allow insurgents to act with impunity and to receive protection from frightened and angry kinsmen and sympathizers. Iraqi officials estimate the insurgents at five to fifteen thousand Iraqis, helped by several hundred foreign extremists with deadly skills and daring, and a potential support network of tens of thousands of Iraqis.

Insurgents fall into two basic categories: secular nationalists who want to return to the style of governance from which they benefited for more than eighty years, joined by "bitter-enders" with no particular vision for Iraq; and religious extremists who want to make Iraq into an Islamic state. All demand the immediate withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign forces and threaten Iraqis whom they perceive as collaborators or as insufficiently nationalist or Islamic. They have little else in common.

Nationalist-minded insurgents are mostly Saddam loyalists, former military men, members of tribes connected to Saddam, and hard-line Baathists. Their goals appear limited to regaining local power through a campaign of terror aimed at destabilizing Iraq and denying victory to the United States and successor Iraqi governments. Reportedly they receive support from Syrian Arab nationalists, remnants of the Iraqi Baath Party, and the extended tribal clans and confederations that sprawl across central and northwestern Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Many are probably linked as well to Sunni Arab Muslim extremists whose influence in Iraq appears to be spreading.

Iraq's religious insurgents are far more dangerous. They include Sunni and Shiite factions that emerged after the end of Saddam's rule from years underground or in exile. They share a vision of an Islamic Iraq where the Quran and *Sharia* are the only source of law, economic and social justice prevail (at least for Muslims), and all foreign influence has been removed. Arab Sunni extremist clerics have formed a political coalition, the Council of Muslim Scholars, and advocate attacks on U.S. forces. Fallujah and other towns in the Sunni heartland are under virtual Islamist rule, with women heavily veiled, men forced to wear beards, strict codes of Islamic law enforced, and harsh punishments meted out. Members of at least one faction, Ansar Al Sunna, trained in Afghanistan with Al Qaeda. Shiite insurgents are mainly those affiliated with Moqtada Al Sadr, the young leader from an important clerical family who expanded his father's support base in the Shiite shrine cities and created the Mahdi Army to attack foreign forces and moderate leaders. Sadr is supported primarily by young, urban, dispossessed and angry Iraqis. He is less popular among mainstream Shiites who look to the more moderate but aging Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani for guidance.

Abu Musab Al Zarqawi is the most lethal of the extremist insurgents. Allegedly a Jordanian Islamic extremist who trained with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, he claims responsibility for attacks against U.S. and other foreign targets, including the attack in August 2003 that killed the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq Sergio Vieira de Mello. His loyalists appear to be most active in predominantly Sunni Arab areas of central and western Iraq. While Zarqawi's current relationship with Osama bin Ladin is not known, terrorism experts describe him more as a rival than as a follower of the Al Qaeda leader. Zarqawi's successes have spawned imitators among Iraq's indigenous insurgents.

Iraq's insurgents will continue to challenge U.S. forces and to test the endurance of post-Saddam governments. Insurgents in the Sunni Arab heartland probably will oppose the elections scheduled for January 2005 and use terrorism to keep fellow citizens from voting. Others, including nationalist insurgents, politicians displaced by the interim government of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, and Sadr loyalists, may try to manipulate the electoral process to ensure the right people are elected to the new parliament and to the committee that will draft the permanent constitution. The insurgents are better organized and better armed than their moderate opponents. Allawi's efforts to negotiate with Sadr loyalists and urban and Sunni tribal leaders could defuse the more violent aspects of insurgent operations, but they will not end the attacks on U.S. forces and Iraqis seen to be collaborating with them. That

will require cooperation from Iraqis in cities and towns throughout the country who have condoned insurgent activities and rejected reconciliation.

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Arab Judicial Reform: Bold Visions, Few Achievements

By Nathan J. Brown

Donors tend to focus on non-controversial technical issues when promoting the rule of law abroad. In sharp contrast, judicial reformers in the Arab world have plunged into the political aspects of judicial reform far more enthusiastically. Their zeal, however, has not yet translated into success.

Advocates of judicial reform within the Arab world are found in three places. The first is bar associations, which in many countries have become highly politicized bodies whose members advocate nationalist, liberal and Islamist agendas and often focus on legal and judicial reform. A second source is the judiciary itself, where judges often press for greater judicial autonomy and professionalization. Judges have not always been able to articulate an independent political vision, due to domination by the executive and to a professional aversion to political involvement. But sometimes they have been able to speak collectively in support of reform. Third, opposition parties and human rights and democracy organizations increasingly direct their attention to strengthening the rule of law.

These advocates of judicial reform became outspoken in the 1980s and 1990s, sometimes trying to effect change through court decisions. In 1987, a Tunisian court asserted the right of the judiciary to strike down as unconstitutional actions of other branches of government, and Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian, and even Iraqi courts asserted some right to review decisions taken under emergency rule. In most cases, these rulings had little effect. The Iraqi, Jordanian, and Tunisian court decisions were met with forceful executive action robbing them of impact. Perhaps the only country in which judicial decisions had sustained impact was Egypt, where the administrative courts and the Supreme Constitutional Court made use of the autonomy granted them to strike out boldly against the executive branch.

More frequently, therefore, reformist hopes focused on legislative change rather than on court decisions. Reformers gave particular attention to revising the legislative framework for establishing and organizing courts. Egypt in 1984 and Kuwait in 1996 adopted new laws that offered reformers significant concessions. Other countries, such as Morocco and Jordan, also have seen progress toward creating more autonomous judiciaries through legislation, though reformers there have felt stymied in the past few years.

Even as the salience of judicial reform increased, reformers' efforts remained focused at the country level until quite recently. Efforts to place judicial reform on the regional

agenda began in earnest only in the past five years. In 1999, the "First Arab Conference on Justice" was convened in Beirut and issued recommendations that echoed general international standards on judicial independence while recasting them in a regional context. In February 2003, the "Second Arab Conference on Justice," held in Cairo, worked to give some specificity to the earlier Beirut declaration. And in September 2003, Bahrain hosted an "Arab Judicial Forum" with the cooperation of the United States. Other regional reform conclaves, such as the March 2004 conference at Egypt's Alexandria Library, have raised matters related to the judiciary and the rule of law.

A well-formed agenda has begun to emerge out of such discussions. Reading the various declarations, manifestos, and pronouncements reveals several common reform demands:

- Judicial councils (which oversee judicial appointments and promotions) need far more autonomy to reduce the powerful influence exerted by heads of state and ministers of justice.
- Judicial councils need more authority. Budgeting, oversight of support personnel, and investigation and disciplining of judges should all be transferred from the Ministry of Justice to judicial councils.
- Special courts, exceptional courts, and emergency rule must be abolished. Civilians should not be tried in military courts.

These recommendations are deeply political and go to the core issues of judicial independence in the Arab world. The issues on which donors tend to focus, such as caseload management and alternative dispute resolution, receive far less attention. Thus the internal calls for reform are characterized by political boldness, and they resonate deeply within their societies and build on existing models, rather than importing less familiar concepts and techniques as donors often seek to do.

Despite the consensus on the end-goal of judicial reform, there is often discord between many reform-minded judges and civil society-based activists over the means to achieve it. The former tend to be more cautious and to value past accomplishments; the latter tend to take a far more confrontational and uncompromising approach. Some reformist judges are concerned that their independence will be compromised if they are linked too closely to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially those with an opposition coloration. Indeed, the stridency of NGOs' language sometimes provokes concern among sitting judges that the issues are becoming too politicized and oversimplified.

Thus, for all their daring, the internal reformers can cite only incremental achievements in a few cases, and even this progress seems glacial and reversible. While reformers are easily able to articulate a vision of the proper role for the judiciary, they have not yet been able to develop realistic strategies for change.

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in the Arab World (*Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997*) and Constitutions in a Nonconstitutional World (*Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001*).

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News and Views

Egypt Rejects New Political Parties, Again

In the aftermath of September's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) conference, with its theme of reform, three new Egyptian political parties have seen their request for registration postponed or denied yet again. The registration application of the liberal-oriented Hizb Al Ghad ("Tomorrow Party"), founded by former Al Wafd Party member Ayman Nour, was rejected in July 2003 by the Political Parties Affairs Committee (PPAC). Nour appealed to the Political Parties Court, which on September 26 postponed its ruling until November, citing the absence of a quorum—Nour claimed that several members failed to appear on the instructions of the NDP, which wanted to abort the vote. Since the composition of the Court will be reshuffled in October, the case proceedings will have to be repeated. The Hizb Al Wasat Al Jadid ("New Centrist Party") saw its application rejected by the PPAC for the third time on October 2. Al Wasat claims to represent a moderate stream of political Islam. Although the PPAC offered no reason for its decision, in the past, government officials have stated that the party is a front for the banned Muslim Brotherhood. On the same day, the PPAC also refused to recognize Hizb Al Karama ("Dignity Party"), which espouses a pan-Arabist philosophy.

Palestinians Register to Vote

Sixty-eight percent of the 1.6 million eligible Palestinian voters in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or 1,109,444 people, have registered to vote during a six-week campaign, the Palestinian Central Election Commission (CEC) reported. The campaign was extended a week to October 13 due to an initial sluggish public response. Sixteen registration centers remain open in main cities. CEC figures show that slightly more West Bank residents have registered than have voters in Gaza. Israeli forces have prevented Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem from registering, claiming that any activity by the Palestinian Authority in East Jerusalem is illegal because, according to government spokesman Raanan Gissin, "Jerusalem is sovereign Israeli territory...and is not within the municipal boundaries determined by the 1981 Law approved by the Knesset."

Palestinians are preparing for municipal elections scheduled to be held in four stages between December 2004 and December 2005. These will be the first such elections held in the Palestinian territories since 1974. Hamas, which boycotted the 1996 legislative and presidential elections, has announced that it plans to participate. Palestinian analysts believe that the staggered voting is a strategy by President Yasser Arafat to test the political waters by limiting the initial balloting to areas where his Fatah party is likely to win.

Saudi Arabia: Elections Delayed; Government Employees Silenced

The Saudi government has postponed for a second time the country's first nationwide elections, in which Saudis will elect half the members of 178 municipal councils. The first stage of voting, for councils in the capital, Riyadh, was rescheduled from November to February 10, 2005. Balloting in the eastern and southwestern regions will now occur on March 3, and voters in the north and central regions, including the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, will go to the polls on April 21. Women will not be allowed to vote or to run as candidates, Minister of Interior Prince Nayif Bin Abdul Aziz announced on October 11. Election officials cited logistical reasons for the decision, including an insufficient number of women available to run women-only registration centers and polling stations, and the fact that only a fraction of Saudi women possess the photo identity cards required for voting. The announcement ends the hopes of three women who had announced plans to run: Nadia Bakhurji, an architect; Fatin Bundaqji, Director of Women's Empowerment and Research at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and Fatima Al Khreiji, a special education teacher.

In an earlier development, the Saudi Council of Ministers announced on September 13 that the government intends to implement laws that forbid public employees, civilian or military, from challenging government policies by "participating, directly or indirectly, in the preparation of any document, speech or petition, engaging in dialogue with local and foreign media, or participating in any meetings intended to oppose the state's policies." State employees have been among the signatories of recent petitions calling for political and economic reform.

The United States Declares Saudi Arabia a Violator of Religious Freedom

The U.S. State Department's 2004 International Religious Freedom Report lists Saudi Arabia among the countries that violate or restrict the religious freedom of their citizens, for the first time designating it a "country of particular concern" (CPC). The [September 15 report](#) states that "freedom of religion does not exist in Saudi Arabia...it is not recognized or protected under the country's laws, and basic religious freedoms are denied to all but those who adhere to the state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam." The report accuses the Saudi government of committing "particularly severe violations" of religious liberty. CPC designation can be used as a basis for sanctions, but since the State Department first began evaluating religious freedom in 1999, it has never applied sanctions against any CPC. The other countries designated as CPCs in this year's report are Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Sudan.

Jordanian Government Arrests Nine Muslim Brothers

The Jordanian authorities arrested nine members of the Muslim Brotherhood on September 8 on charges of preaching in mosques without an official license. Seven members of the group, which included former members of Parliament and the former minister of religious

endowments and Islamic affairs, were released shortly after signing a pledge not to give sermons without prior approval from the authorities. Two others, Ahmed Kafaween and Ahmed Zarqan, refused to sign and remained in custody for three days. At a meeting with the group's leaders on September 12, Prime Minister Faisal Al Fayez agreed to retract the arrest warrants and to allow a gradual return of Brotherhood clerics to the mosques, in return for the group's commitment to uphold the preaching and guidance law. The law states that only licensed clerics can deliver Friday sermons, which must be free of political content.

The crackdown is an unusual development in Jordan. Although relations between the Brotherhood and the Jordanian government have sometimes been tense, especially following the 1994 signing of the peace treaty with Israel, historically the group has faced far less repression than its counterparts in many other Arab countries. The Brotherhood and its affiliated political party, the Islamic Action Front, accused Jordanian authorities of acting on American instructions to keep them from speaking out against the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq and from criticizing Jordanian ties with Israel. In an interview broadcast on the pan-Arab satellite television station Al Jazeera, Brotherhood leader Abdul Majid Thuneibat warned that stepped-up harassment by the authorities could force the movement to go underground. This prompted accusations in the pro-government press that the Brotherhood was "violating Jordanian principles and threatening national security."

Narrowing Political Space in Bahrain

Two years after parliamentary elections that many hoped would usher in a new period of democratization, the Bahraini government appears set to curb independent political activity. A [draft law](#) that would restrict the activities of political societies, Bahrain's de facto political parties, is pending before Parliament, having received a green light from the government.

The law would require existing societies to reapply for legal status. Such status would only be granted to organizations that accept the 2002 constitution. If enacted, the law would probably signal the demise of Bahrain's main opposition societies, Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, the National Democratic Action Society, the Islamic Action Society, and the National Democratic Society. All openly oppose the 2002 constitution and are campaigning for a return to the 1973 charter. The law would also ban members of the Interior Ministry, the diplomatic corps, the judiciary, and the army from joining political societies and would prohibit societies from associating with foreign organizations. Violators will be punished with sentences of up to life imprisonment.

On September 25, Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, Director of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), was arrested after blaming Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa Al Khalifa for human rights abuses and for the country's economic failures. Al Khawaja, who remains in detention during an investigation, has been accused of "encouraging hatred of the state" and "circulating falsehoods and rumors" and faces five years' imprisonment. On September

29, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Majid Al Alawi also dissolved the BCHR, which was established in 2002, on the grounds that it had violated the 1989 associations law.

Preparations for "Forum for the Future" Rekindle Past Controversy

A September 24 preparatory meeting for the first Forum for the Future—the annual meeting of ministers, business leaders and civil society members called for by the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA)—brought to the fore a major controversy that has dogged the project: whether it should encompass the "Broader Middle East," which at Washington's insistence includes Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey as well as the Arab countries, or whether it should be limited to Arab countries, as several Arab governments, led by Egypt, argue.

BMENA, launched in June 2004 by the Group of Eight industrialized nations (G-8), seeks to join the G-8 countries in an effort to promote economic, social and political reform in the region.

The controversy about which countries should be covered by the initiative was apparent in the discussion of where the first ministerial meeting should be held. Morocco offered to host all BMENA countries, while Egypt argued in favor of a meeting in Cairo attended only by Arab states. The compromise decision, which temporarily shelves the controversy but does not resolve it, was to convene the Forum in Morocco in December, followed by a meeting of G-8 and Arab countries in Cairo early next year. The preparatory meeting, which took place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting, also featured presentations on reform priorities from representatives of the Arab Business Council and of the Partnership for Peace, Democracy and Development in the BMENA, a new civil society group.

Middle East Reform in the U.S. Presidential Campaign

The 2004 Republican Party [platform](#), "A Safer World and a More Hopeful America," discusses the issue of Middle East reform under the heading "Winning the War on Terror," asserting that to combat terrorism the United States should "energetically promote democracy, especially in the Broader Middle East." The platform endorses President George W. Bush's "Forward Strategy of Freedom in the Middle East" and his "policy of working with every government in the Middle East dedicated to destroying the terrorist networks, while in the longer term expecting a higher standard of reform and democracy from our friends in the region." The platform also supports the Bush administration's commitment to double the budget of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and applauds the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) as well as the "expansion of America's public diplomacy efforts, including the use of radio and television to broadcast uncensored information and a message of tolerance in Arabic and Persian to tens of millions of people." The platform warns that Palestinians can "count on American support

for the creation of a Palestinian state" only if they "embrace democracy and the rule of law, confront corruption, and firmly reject terror."

The 2004 Democratic Party [platform](#), "Strong at Home, Respected in the World," includes discussion of Middle East reform in a section titled "A Strong, Respected America." It states that promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law is vital to the long-term security of the United States and that "Americans will be safer in a world of democracies." It asserts, "democracy will not blossom overnight, but America should speed its growth by sustaining the forces of democracy against repressive regimes and by rewarding governments that work toward this end." The document also asserts that fighting terrorism "requires a major initiative in public diplomacy to support many voices of freedom in the Arab and Muslim world, establishing a cooperative international education initiative, and supporting human rights groups, independent media, and labor unions dedicated to building a democratic culture from the grassroots up." Iraq is described as the starting point for this effort: "We will restore America's credibility and commitment as a force for democracy and human rights, starting in Iraq." The platform calls for "the creation of a democratic Palestinian state" and commits to "work to transform the Palestinian Authority by promoting new and responsible leadership, committed to fighting terror and promoting democracy." The platform also states that the United States cannot remain dependent on Middle East oil: "A strong America must no longer rely on the cooperation of regimes that do not share our values."

Views from the Arab Press: Reform in Egypt

The September 2004 conference of Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) provoked much critical commentary in the Egyptian and pan-Arab press. Writing in Egypt's government-owned daily *Al Ahrām* on September 21, leading columnist Salama Ahmed Salama [frowns on](#) the NDP for leaving the key issues facing Egypt's political system—the need for constitutional reform, the upcoming presidential referendum, and the perpetuation of emergency rule—off the conference agenda.

Negative critiques of the conference appeared in abundance in *Al Masri Al Yawm* ("The Egyptian Today"), a new independent political daily. Magdi Mahanna's September 25 column casts as insincere President Hosni Mubarak's call at the conference for civil society and political parties to join the NDP in a "dialogue." The NDP refuses to listen to the demands of the opposition and to discuss issues that truly matter to the Egyptian public. In a September 25 opinion piece, analyst Nabil Abdel Fattah chastises the NDP's "new technocrats," prominent at the conference, for being devoid of political imagination and for lacking a clear vision of the future of constitutional reform, the emergency law, and the relationship between religion and the state. Abdel Fattah writes that they are "afraid of democracy and of the Egyptian public." Analyst Wahid Abdel Majid comments in a September 22 opinion article that the NDP's proposal for amending political party legislation fails to rectify the central flaw of the current law—that authorities can refuse to recognize or dissolve parties based on very broad criteria.

Hussein Abdel Razeq, Secretary General of the opposition Tagammu Party, writing in the September 30 edition of the opposition daily *Al Wafd*, [accuses](#) the NDP of appropriating opposition reform slogans as part of a strategy to deceive the Egyptian public and avoid anything but superficial reform.

In an October 4 op-ed [article](#) in the liberal daily *Nahdat Misr*, commentator Hassan Al Shami argues that the NDP is not the only political force opposed to the constitutional reforms demanded by opposition parties and intellectuals. Others also fear that efforts to amend the constitution would lead to political chaos. The Tagammu Party, for instance, is wary of any changes that would undermine the constitution's guarantees of social services for the working class. Islamist forces want to preserve the references to *Sharia*, or Islamic law, in the current constitution.

Islamist commentator Amer Sammakh, in a September 30 article appearing on [Afaq Arabiyya](#), a website close to the Muslim Brotherhood, accuses the NDP of spending 3.5 million Egyptian pounds of the citizens' money for a conference of propaganda and lies. The NDP's failure to announce a commitment to lift the emergency law, release thousands of Islamist political prisoners, and amend the laws governing syndicates and civil society proved once again that the ruling party pursues only its members' interests.

Egyptian analyst Amr Hamzawy criticizes the liberal discourse on reform that permeated the conference in a September 23 analysis in the pan-Arab newspaper [Ash-Sharq Al Awsat](#). This discourse is based on two precepts: the belief in a market economy and in the retreat of the state's role as the key to growth; and the push for liberal ideals such as women's empowerment and the creation of a "knowledge society." It avoids any discussion of ideas of wealth distribution, unemployment, poverty, and the increasing marginalization of the middle class.

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Read On

Several new publications examine reform and stability in the monarchies of the Arabian peninsula. F. Gregory Gause III, writing in *Foreign Policy*, [argues](#) that if the Saudi Arabian monarchy is to survive, it must battle the militants, maintain the support of the religious establishment that has always given legitimacy to its rule, and offer the middle class a taste of democracy while resisting full-scale democratization ("How to Reform Saudi Arabia Without Handing It to Extremists," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2004, 66-70).

A [report](#) by the International Crisis Group (ICG) concludes that the Kingdom's radical Islamists will be marginalized only if moderate Islamists can offer viable social, religious, and political solutions to the country's problems ("Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: Who are the Islamists?," ICG Middle East Report no. 31, September 21, 2004). To bolster the moderates, the Saudi regime should expand freedom of expression for progressive

Islamists, release imprisoned reformers, continue the national dialogue meetings launched last year, and mount a sustained effort to fight corruption, poverty, and exclusion.

The Sultanate of Oman does not face an immediate danger of instability, contends Mark N. Katz, but shrinking oil reserves, a fast-growing population, stirrings of opposition, and the unwillingness of Sultan Qabus to share power could threaten stability in the long term ("[Assessing the Political Stability of Oman](#)," *MERIA*, vol. 8, no. 3, September 2004, 1-10).

Andrzej Kapiszewski provides a detailed review of political reform in the Gulf monarchies since 1991 in his new monograph, "[Democratizing the Arab States: The Case of Monarchies of the Gulf, 1991-2004](#)" (*Krakow International Studies*, vol. 3, 2004, 69-129).

The Palestinian political system is facing its most acute crisis yet due to the extreme weakening of the Palestinian Authority and to power struggles and armed clashes that pit Palestinian groups against one another, asserts a new ICG [report](#) titled "Who Governs the West Bank? Palestinian Administration under Israeli Occupation" (ICG, Middle East Report no. 32, September 28, 2004). President Yasser Arafat's dominant Fatah movement has failed to establish order or to unify its ranks around a clear political vision. Mayors, kinship networks, and armed militias have tried to fill the vacuum, leading to political chaos. The report argues that holding elections in a political environment in which Palestinians believe their vote is meaningful could help address the governance crisis.

Two new Carnegie Endowment publications by Michele Dunne offer practical suggestions for U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East. Dunne's Carnegie Paper, "[Integrating Democracy Promotion into U.S. Middle East Policy](#)," argues that the United States can—and must—simultaneously pursue Arab-Israeli peace, security cooperation, and the promotion of political reform and human rights (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Series, Carnegie Paper no. 50, October 2004). The paper also sketches a strategy for incorporating democracy promotion into U.S. policy toward Egypt.

Dunne's Policy Brief, "[Libya: Security Is Not Enough](#)," contends that the United States must correct the impression, created by its recent warming of ties with Libya, that "the United States will forgo its declared interest in Arab democratization if a country takes positive security-related steps and has enough petroleum to offer" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief no. 32, October 2004). Dunne recommends that the United States incorporate the promotion of gradual political reform and human rights improvements into the process of rebuilding relations with Libya.

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