

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Authoritarian Democracy and  
Democratic Authoritarianism

by Jon B. Alterman

For a part of the world that doesn't have a lot of freedom, the Middle East certainly has a lot of elections that count. On May 16, Kuwaitis elected a new parliament, sending women to the chamber for the first time. On June 7, Lebanese will go to the polls, and five days later, Iranians will have their turn.

Kuwaitis' election of four women was a surprise even to close observers, who had watched all of the female candidates go to defeat in elections just a year ago. Handicappers have expectations for the elections next month—an uneasy tie between the pro- and anti-Hezbollah factions in Lebanon, and a photo finish in Iran. But what makes these elections so interesting is that their outcomes are truly unknown. In much of the region, the results are a foregone conclusion. Rulers are not about to allow challengers, and victory margins of 20, 40, or even 90 percent are commonplace. These countries are different.

The countries that have meaningful elections are not the most liberal ones by any means. Kuwait and Iran both ban alcohol and take religious law to be the bedrock of legislation. Lebanon is more libertine, but in many parts of the country, religious rule is ascendant.

For many Americans, this is a paradox. We see elections as manifestations of liberalism, yet Middle Eastern elections rarely produce liberal outcomes. Conservative forces, often cloaked in an air of religious legitimacy, tend to do well. Their success is due in part to their superior level of organization, their greater outreach, and the importance they attach to the elections themselves. Conservative figures in the Middle East—like conservatives everywhere in the world—also play on a sense of authenticity in a rapidly changing and often confusing world.

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## Help is on the Way

While the self-help movement has traditionally been characterized as a uniquely American phenomenon—an \$11 billion industry in 2008—it is also burgeoning in the Middle East. In Saudi Arabia, self-help books like *Men Are From Mars, Women are From Venus* are bestsellers; the Farsi translation of *The Secret*, a renowned (and Oprah-endorsed) book about the power of optimism, is in its 10th printing in Iran, and independent self-help magazines such as Iran's *Happiness Magazine* dot the shelves of bookstores and newsstands throughout the country.

Oprah Winfrey has a huge following, showing twice a day on pan-Arab television. Yet a surprising entry into the self-help field is Muslim clerics, who are increasingly assuming the roles of charismatic self-help gurus. Increasingly, they are generating bestselling books and popular television shows that embed the notions of success and self-improvement within a framework of Islamic values. In *Stop Worrying, Relax and Be Happy*, Egyptian Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali directly cites Dale Carnegie's 1936 classic *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. Adopting Carnegie's metaphor of a flexible twig that resists snapping in the wind, Al-Ghazali encourages Muslims to bow to Allah's will so as to avoid "snapping" in difficult times. Saudi Sheikh Aaidh al-Qarni has become another "motivational sheikh." In 2007 he claimed his book *Don't be Sad* has sold two million copies, but bloggers complain it is merely an Islamicized version of Carnegie's message. As this ethic of personal growth and self-improvement continues to spread, it's hard to imagine how the desire to "win friends and influence people" could ever be uniquely American. ■ CB

## King Abdullah II of Jordan visits CSIS

CSIS hosted King Abdullah II of Jordan on April 24. Speaking to a luncheon crowd of 160, the king spoke about the urgency of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and argued that a U.S. role in helping do so would serve both U.S. strategic interests and U.S. credibility. The king said, "We do not have time to engage in yet another open-ended process. We have seen what comes of process without progress. Every missed opportunity has alienated more people on both sides." In his call for energetic U.S. engagement, he stated that "The U.S. commitment to Palestinian statehood must be unambiguous in deeds as well as words." To view both the transcript and video of the king's speech, click [HERE](#). ■

This is not the season of religious parties, however. Voters want results, not rhetoric, and a decade's worth of religious parties' ascendance has meant that these parties have an increasingly difficult time distancing themselves from responsibility for the status quo in many countries. In addition, many Middle Eastern governments have become adept at splitting religious oppositions, co-opting some parts and repressing others in order to prevent the creation of a powerful opposition bloc in the legislature.

Despite all of the elections, those actually ruling these countries have remained firmly in control, and they have tried to create environments in which legislatures have responsibility without authority. Indeed, when people talk of "the government" in most parts of the Middle East, they almost exclusively mean the executive branch. Kings, emirs, and presidents rule, and legislatures endorse that rule. Criticizing the ruler remains taboo in many countries, and questioning the ruler's legitimacy is almost unthinkable.

If that is the case, then, why do all of these elections matter? There are several reasons. First of all, elections are an indicator of the popular will, even in countries without truly democratic rule. Even the world's most authoritarian leaders keep close tabs on what their people think, and elections—both in terms of outcomes and turnout—are important indicators of that. Successful campaign themes, especially by opposition candidates, can serve as harbingers of danger for governments. Similarly, especially high or especially low turnouts are signs that something is amiss.

Second, elections can help spur public debate and vet new ideas. While legislators' ability to force adoption of those ideas is quite limited, elections can help expand the solution set that governments consider.

But third, and most important, elected officials are slowly gaining more influence in the Middle East. With the rise of regional media on the one hand, and informal media such as the Internet, blogs, and text messages on the other, elected officials have a growing ability to shape public debate in such a way that it certainly constrains government policy and, in the most positive sense, begins to help shape it. Elected officials are necessarily interested in the actions of governments, and they speak about them. While many are loyal to the government, many are not, and they have an increasingly diverse set of outlets for their dissenting opinions.

All of this has not produced democracy. Elected officials often demagogue on issues more than they analyze them. In many cases, elected officials (from Kuwaiti parliamentarians to the president of Iran) have shown a single-minded determination to maximize the subsidies delivered to citizens rather than make hard choices about resource allocations. All of that is, perhaps, to be expected.

But electoral uncertainty in the Middle East, on top of the other uncertainties that governments face, helps leaven a governmental process that has often been slow and leaden. Elections can do little by themselves, but the uncertainty surrounding them creates expectations of change. From that expectation, change may come. ■ 5/22/09

## Links of Interest

The CSIS Middle East Program hosted a Gulf Roundtable, *Assessing the Iranian Nuclear Challenge* with David Kay of the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

The CSIS Middle East Program hosted a Congressional Forum on Islam Event, *Islam, Politics and the Resurgence of the State* with Steve Heydemann of the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Jon Alterman was quoted by the New York Times, "Obama Tells Netanyahu He Has Iran Timetable."

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