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Insights and Analysis

Egypt: Creating a New Political Reality

Amr Hamzawy

Translated from Arabic by Michele Dunne

At present there are at least three possible readings of Egyptian politics. There is the government version, in which President Mubarak's decision to amend Article 76 of the constitution to permit direct and pluralistic elections for the presidency is an historic reform step approved by a majority of Egyptians, first via the two chambers of parliament and then via the May 25 public referendum. Government newspapers and writers close to the ruling National Democracy Party (NDP) stress that the constitutional amendment was not an isolated step, but was preceded by a package of political reforms during the last few years including the establishment of the National Council for Human Rights and abrogation of emergency courts. They suggest more change will be coming regarding laws pertaining to political rights and participation, and the electoral system. Thus they project an image of an Egyptian government committed to a gradual democratic transformation that will not disrupt stability or security, and which will guarantee continuous economic growth and an end to poverty and unemployment. Although President Mubarak has not yet declared his intention to run for a sixth presidential term, the media campaign supporting him has already begun, for example in a six-hour television interview with Mubarak entitled "My Testimony to History."

Opposition parties and various protest movements—particularly the Egyptian Movement for Change, Kifaya—offer a second perspective, accusing the government and NDP of evading demands for political reform while pursuing two well-known Mubarak strategies: making cosmetic changes that do not touch the regime structure in any substantial way, and employing systematic repression against opposition forces. The Egyptian opposition points to the following: First, the amendment of article 76 of the constitution is devoid of democratic content due to the nearly impossible conditions for independent candidates as well as the difficult conditions for opposition parties to get candidates on the presidential ballot from 2011 onward (the party would need to hold 5 percent of parliamentary seats). Such conditions—not unusual in well-established democracies where they exist to avoid fragmentation of the political sphere but inappropriate in an authoritarian system seeking to democratize—caused the opposition to call on Egyptians to boycott the referendum. Second, the amendment does not provide for full judicial supervision of the presidential election but rather forms a presidential electoral commission composed of five judges and five public figures appointed by the NDP-controlled parliament. Third, the government has not acceded to opposition demands to abrogate the emergency law, lift restrictions on forming political parties, and limit the powers of the president of the republic. Fourth, the government has increased its repression of opposition movements, in particular the Muslim Brothers, nearly one thousand of whom have been arrested in recent weeks, including leadership figures. In addition, there were beatings and sexual assaults of activists from Kifaya and other movements on the day of the constitutional referendum. Fifth, the government is trying to bypass the demands of Egyptian judges for full and independent judicial supervision of presidential and parliamentary elections by employing both sticks and carrots. Sixth, regarding international election monitoring, the Egyptian opposition is divided between those who reject it as a form of unwanted foreign intervention and those who see it as having become an accepted practice globally; surprisingly the Muslim Brothers tend toward the latter position.

A third reading of the situation, which relies on historical comparisons, notes that the current political scene in Egypt is unprecedented in terms of variety, and provides both government and opposition with new models of political interaction that will ultimately tend toward greater freedom and pluralism. Never since the beginning of the Mubarak era in 1981 has the government faced such organized opposition, some of it within government institutions, and never before have opposition forces gotten such a hearing in Washington and European capitals. Although the opposition is accustomed to government repression, it still has a limited capacity to sustain confrontation with the government, or to take advantage of the opportunities and challenges of coordination between secular and religious forces.

On the surface, some developments even appear comical. Security forces abuse demonstrators during a referendum and then are criticized by the prime minister and president after a telephone call from President Bush. The Kifaya ("Enough") Movement raises a slogan for change and is answered by an NDP slogan of *Mish Kifaya* ("Not Enough"). The opposition uses a song criticizing Arab leaders by popular singer Shaban Abdel Rahim in order to criticize Mubarak, and the government convinces the singer to produce a new song entitled "Whether Yes or No, Mubarak is Best." Some judges demand democratic change, while others support Mubarak and stability. And so the government and opposition compete for public opinion locally and globally, and yet accept each other in practice. Thus, despite the slow and limited nature of

reform so far, the current pluralistic moment is leading toward a qualitatively new stage of democratic change in Egypt, and the upcoming parliamentary elections may be the opening act.

Amr Hamzawy is a senior associate in the Democracy and Rule of Law project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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Egypt: Judges Club Challenges the Regime

Dina Shehata

In recent months, with pressures on the Egyptian government to reform growing, elements of Egyptian civil society have seized the moment to advance longstanding agendas. Among the most surprising and significant groups to press their advantage were judges. On May 13 the Judges Club of Egypt convened an emergency general assembly, in which the more than 1,500 judges in attendance presented the Mubarak regime with an ultimatum. The judges made their supervision—required by the constitution—of upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections subject to two conditions. The first was adopting, before the end of the legislative session in June, a draft law prepared by the Judges Club guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary, while the second was amending the political participation law to ensure full judicial supervision of the electoral process. While judges supervised what went on inside polling places during the 2000 parliamentary elections, heavy-handed measures by the Ministry of Interior outside led to irregularities in a number of districts.

The Judges Club had been lobbying the Egyptian government for nearly 15 years to pass a law freeing the judiciary from financial and administrative control by the Ministry of Justice. The draft law allocates to the judiciary an independent budget and gives the Supreme Judicial Council (made up of senior judges) rather than the Ministry (part of the executive branch) the right to appoint, supervise, and discipline judges. On March 20, the Judges Club presented its draft to parliament and demanded that it be ratified before the end of the current legislative session in June. Meanwhile the Ministry of Justice drafted an alternative law, which ignored the principal demands of the Judges Club, thus precipitating the standoff between the Judges Club and the government.

Similarly, and in light of their experience in supervising the 2000 elections, the judges demanded that the political participation law be amended to restrict the role of the executive, especially the Ministry of the Interior, in the electoral process and to guarantee full judicial supervision as stipulated by the constitution. The draft law presented by the government to the legislative committee of parliament, however, failed to meet these requirements. Especially problematic from the judges' point of view was the proposed composition of the electoral commission, which the judges had insisted be fully composed of senior judges chosen by the judiciary. The government's draft law, by contrast, stipulates that the commission be composed of three judges chosen by the Supreme Judicial Council, one representative each from the Ministries of Interior and Justice, and five non-partisan figures—two of them former judges and three public figures chosen by the upper house of parliament (dominated by the ruling National Democratic Party).

In response to the judges' challenge, the regime initially adopted a divide-and-rule strategy. At the behest of the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Judicial Council issued a declaration to counter the Judges Club, insisting that it was the only body authorized to speak on behalf of the judiciary and affirming judges' unconditional commitment to supervise upcoming elections. The government-controlled mass media highlighted the positions of loyalist judges and there were reports in opposition newspapers that the Minister of Justice invited individual judges to sign statements pledging their participation in electoral supervision. The Minister of Justice also succeeded in securing the allegiance of the State Council Judges Club, which is separate from the Judges Club of Egypt and has a membership of 1,100 judges. In return, the Minister of Justice offered State Council judges one million Egyptian pounds (approximately \$150,000) in annual support for their club, increased the number of monitors from the State Council from 320 to 1,100 judges, allocated new buildings and rest houses for State Council judges, and offered administrative jobs at the Ministry of Justice to family members of State Council judges.

Many feared that these divide-and-rule strategies would pit judges against one another and thereby weaken and corrupt the judiciary, the only state institution that retains some credibility with the Egyptian public. The Judges Club has held fast, however, and announced it would hold a second emergency meeting on June 17 to reaffirm its position. In response, the government appears to be acceding to the judges' demands. The Minister of Justice announced after a meeting with the board of the Judges Club that the government accepts the draft law prepared by the Club. The government also promised to take the propositions of the Judges Club regarding the Political Participation Law more seriously. If the government keeps these promises, a compromise between the government and the judges is likely to ensue, allowing the judiciary to secure greater independence while giving the government's declared commitment to reform greater credibility.

Dina Shehata is a researcher at the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo.

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Palestine: A New Hamas?

Khaled Hroub

Will Hamas and Sharon sit at the same negotiating table in the near future? Yesterday's inconceivable fantasies may become tomorrow's realities, regarding developments in the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. In a series of historic decisions over the past few months, Hamas has decided to run for Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections in the West Bank and Gaza, put on hold all militant operations along with other Palestinian factions, and consider seriously joining the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). These three steps complement each other and mark a turning point in the movement's political life.

Hamas boycotted the 1996 PLC elections because they were part and parcel of the 1994 Oslo Agreement, which the movement rejected vehemently. Now Hamas justifies its dramatic change in position by claiming that Oslo is no longer alive due to the intifada that began in September 2000. To be truthful, however, Hamas is living the realities created by Oslo, including the elections. It is not inconceivable that Hamas might eventually take part in peace negotiations, if the PLC elections are held and not blocked due to Israeli concern about Hamas participation.

Hamas is confident of its current strength. In the partial municipal elections held in January and May, it won nearly two-thirds of the seats, although such results should not be taken as an indicator of its expected performance in PLC elections. Unlike its efforts in municipal elections, Hamas will not run at full strength in PLC elections. Well-informed observers know that Hamas is not even trying to win a majority in the Council. Its hope is to head a strong bloc with a Hamas share of 30 to 40 percent of the seats, supplemented by an additional 15 to 20 percent expected to go to independents, leftists, and Fatah's internal opposition. If Hamas realizes its ambitions, the PLC would contain a majority opposition bloc that, even if its not purely Hamas, will nevertheless function as if it were so; that is, it will oppose the current political program of the Palestinian Authority.

A Hamas-led opposition bloc in the PLC would seek to block any decisions seen as compromising Palestinian rights via democratic procedures—but via ballots rather than bullets. This would be a nightmare for Israel and the United States. They pressed the Palestinian Authority for reforms, whether out of a sincere commitment to democracy or not, and now those reforms may well bring Hamas to the heart of the Palestinian polity. By declaring a truce on the militant front and participating in the elections, Hamas is cleverly using the democracy argument against the efforts of Sharon and Bush to pigeonhole Hamas as a terrorist organization. As matters stand now, it is extremely hard for the United States and Israel to oppose the participation of Hamas in PLC elections.

The Israeli government appears deeply worried that Hamas is repositioning itself in a political mode and will have an influential say in the future structure of the Palestinian Authority. Attempting to prevent Hamas participation in the elections directly would look bad. An ugly, if conceivable, alternative could be at hand where Israel might try to provoke Hamas by assassinating one or more of its top leaders, pushing the movement to retaliate violently. Such a course would bring an end to the current truce, triggering reciprocal revenge attacks and creating a chaotic situation in which holding elections becomes virtually impossible. But perhaps feeding an international image of a chaotic, violent Palestinian scene is more useful politically to the current Israeli strategy than allowing a peaceful, democratic scene where all parties interact with each other via elections.

If Israel refrains from such a dire course, holding PLC elections with Hamas participation would have a profound impact on the nature of the movement, the Palestinian political scene, and more importantly the Palestinian-Israeli relationship and peace negotiations. In general, Israelis are correct that strong Hamas influence in the PLC will harden the Palestinian position in negotiations—not necessarily a bad thing. There could never have been a sustainable and final peace deal in any case without a real Palestinian consensus, to which Hamas must be a part. Hamas's political position is pragmatic and flirts with the possibility of accepting the concept of a two-state solution. If a decent final agreement were reached that satisfied Palestinian rights according to parameters of the Madrid Conference and UN resolutions, Hamas would be unable to object. In the end, a moderate, co-opted Hamas inside Palestinian institutions is far better than a radicalized and militarized Hamas on the outside.

Khaled Hroub directs the Cambridge Arab Media Project and is author of Hamas: Political Thought and Practice (Institute of Palestine Studies, Washington D. C., 2000).

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Bahrain: A Democracy Balance Sheet

Mansoor Al-Jamri

Bahrain is either moving toward democracy or going nowhere, depending on to whom one listens. Pro-government quarters depict the Bahraini situation as an advanced model for democracy in the region. According to some in the political opposition, on the other hand, Bahrain is nothing but an absolute dictatorship with democratic window-dressing aimed at fooling friendly Western governments and winning praise from the Bush administration. Opposition forces tend to be more vociferous than government supporters—as well as ready to employ exaggeration to make their case—and therefore carry the day in public discourse.

Between the two conflicting views, many Bahrainis are still reserving judgment on the new political phase that started in early 2001. They see a number of positive developments as compared to the situation before 2001, among them:

- There are no longer any political prisoners. Those who were detained for short periods in the past four years were released without being harmed.
- Restrictions on travel have generally been lifted. In the past, political suspects were prevented from traveling or returning to Bahrain.
- People are free to congregate in houses and public places and to debate political and social issues without fear of consequences.
- Press freedom has expanded significantly.
- Senior members of the ruling establishment, notably the Crown Prince, speak openly about issues of real concern and invite discussion with citizens.
- Non-government organizations have proliferated, with more than 400 groups working in the open on a wide variety of issues, including human rights and politics.

Opposition activists tend to stress the negative aspects of the current picture, believing that louder voices get things done when due process is absent. Among their grievances:

- Bahrain is still burdened with dozens of laws intended to codify the state of Sunni-Shiite tensions that prevailed prior to 2001. Should the government put into use any of these laws, it will turn the clock back to the days when the security and intelligence forces were in charge of the daily lives of Bahrainis.
- The five municipal councils elected in May 2002 are powerless. There are five appointed “governates” and a ministry for municipal affairs that actually oversee and control matters.
- The 80-strong bicameral legislature that was partially elected in October 2002 has been toothless. So far, it has not passed a single law proposed by a member of parliament. The laws that were enacted were proposed by the government, which blocked all those proposed by parliamentarians.
- Electoral districts are unfairly drawn; in some cases, the number of citizens per elected representative can vary by a factor of ten or even 20. This of course fuels speculation about gerrymandering and biased distribution of votes in favor of one section of society versus the other.

There is also the question of the rule of law. In the past three decades not a single Bahraini with influence has been prosecuted for misconduct or inappropriate use of power, for example corruption and or human rights violations. In a truly democratic environment, all must be subject to the rule of law.

A final issue is the lack of trust that persists between Shiites and Sunnis. The opposition movement is predominantly Shiite in nature, with support from a secular liberal elite including both Shiites and Sunnis. Confessionalism still plays a significant role in decision making inside and outside government. There is much work yet to be done in order to establish a democracy agenda that can be shared by the majority of the population at the grassroots level. For now, Bahrainis will continue to debate whether or not their democratic experiment is succeeding.

Mansoor Al-Jamri is editor-in-chief of Al Wasat newspaper.

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Libya: Economic Reforms Anger Citizens

Eman Wahby

As part of its emergence from political and economic isolation, Libya is converting to an open-market economy after decades of socialist-style policies. Among the most unpopular steps taken by the government so far has been cutting subsidies, which has triggered widespread anger among Libyans.

Between soaring oil prices and the removal of UN and U.S. sanctions—lifted after Libya made amends for the 1988 Pan Am 103 bombing and abandoned its weapons of mass destruction programs—Libya's economy is booming. Gross Domestic Product climbed by 9 percent in 2003 and by a healthy 4.5 percent in 2004. According to UN estimates of foreign direct investment (FDI), foreign investors have poured into Libya about \$4 billion in investments in 2004, making Libya the top recipient of foreign investment in Africa. This amount accounted for one-fifth of all the FDI inflow into the continent—not bad for a previous rogue state. According to Libyan economists, however, the majority of Libyan households have not yet felt the impact of such growth; they live on an average of \$200 per month, as public wages have not risen in 30 years and unemployment stands at about 25 percent.

Reformist Prime Minister Shoukri Ghanem, a Harvard-educated economist known for his support of open-market policies, has led Libya's path to economic openness. Since Ghanem's appointment in June 2003, Libya has unveiled its most sweeping proposals for economic reform in 35 years. Over the next five years, Libya plans to privatize 360 state-owned companies and enterprises. As part of liberalization, Ghanem last November announced plans to cut some \$5 billion worth of subsidies. For decades, the state has been subsidizing 93 percent of the value of basic commodities, notably fuel.

Subsidy cuts became a reality in early May when the Libyan authorities imposed a 30 percent hike on fuel prices and a 6 percent increase on diesel prices. During the same month the government doubled the price of electricity for consumers of more than 500 kilowatts per month. Such increases have set off rises in the price of many goods and services as well.

Higher fuel prices have particularly affected Tripoli's taxis and taken a heavy toll on citizens depending on taxis. Akhbar Libya, a Libyan opposition electronic publication, remarked that the increase in fuel prices came at a time when there are no public transportation alternatives for the Libyan citizen. "Subways and buses are almost nonexistent. Before the price hike, taxi prices were already expensive, as employees would have to spend more than half of their monthly salaries on taxis," Akhbar Libya claimed.

Another aspect of economic reform has been the easing of restrictions on imports, and recently foreign companies were granted licenses to export to Libya through local agents. As a result, products from all over the world have flooded the previously isolated Libyan market, raising questions about the fate of workers in Libya's factories, which are unequipped to face competition.

Expressing public anger, press campaigns against Ghanem have recently increased. On May 11, Libyan writer Ezz Al Din Al Lawag wrote in the daily *Libya Al Youm* that limited-income citizens regard Ghanem as public enemy number one because they view his policies as directed against them. "Ghanem increased fuel and electricity prices and he plans to further cut subsidies and wants to implement a huge plan of privatizing public enterprises that would leave thousands of our laborers jobless," Al Lawag wrote.

Although Ghanem has said that there are plans to raise public wages and cut taxes, so far such benefits have not materialized. Meanwhile Ghanem has held firmly to the need to restructure the economy, stating publicly in early June that Libyan citizens would have to share the costs. It remains to be seen whether the benefits of reform will trickle down to the Libyan public before the costs lead to much stronger demonstrations of discontent—and perhaps demands for political as well as economic change.

Eman Wahby is an Egyptian journalist.

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News and Views

Lebanon: Partial Results of Parliamentary Elections

The list led by Saad Hariri, son of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, swept the first round of elections on May

29 in Beirut. Candidates on his list, nine of whom ran unchallenged, won all 19 seats. Only 28 percent of those eligible voted in Beirut. In southern Lebanon on June 5, the coalition led by Shiite parties, Amal and Hezbollah, won all 23 seats. Forty-eight percent of eligible voters went to the polls. Click [here](#) for post-election press releases by the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections.

Elections for the remainder of the 128 seats in the parliament will be held June 12 in the Bekaa Valley and Mount Lebanon, and June 19 in northern Lebanon.

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Palestine: Elections Postponed, Vice Presidency to be Created

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announced June 4 that parliamentary elections scheduled for July 17 would be postponed indefinitely, saying that more time was needed to resolve differences over a new electoral law. The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) passed a law under which two-thirds of the 132-seat parliament would be elected by direct ballot based on electoral districts and the remainder chosen from party lists by proportional representation. Abbas refused to sign the bill into law, however, arguing that that more deputies should be selected by proportional representation.

A Fatah official said legislative elections would probably be pushed back to November 2005. Hamas strongly criticized the decision to postpone the elections, saying it violates the ceasefire agreement in Cairo and harms the credibility of relations with Fatah. The Fatah party conference to elect members of Fatah's main decision making bodies scheduled for August 4 was also postponed indefinitely.

The Fatah Revolutionary Council agreed June 6 to President Abbas's proposal to create the office of Vice President of the Palestinian Authority. Abbas will request that the PLC amend the basic law accordingly. It is not yet clear how a vice president would be selected or what the responsibilities of the office would be.

Following controversy over the results of May 5 municipal elections, the Higher Committee for Local Elections called for a partial revote in the Gaza districts of Rafah, Beit Lahia, and Bureij. Hamas alleged that Fatah is trying to commit electoral fraud and announced that it would boycott the revote and reconsider the cease-fire agreement. As a result, the revote has been postponed indefinitely.

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Syria: Baath Party Congress, Crackdown on Human Rights Activists

According to reports in the Arab press, observers expect the long-awaited Baath Party Congress, which will conclude June 9, to recommend that the government consider lifting emergency laws, revoking Soviet era counter revolutionary and counter socialist laws, and allowing independent political parties. The Party politburo is expected to be reduced in size and to include a mix of new and old guard figures. President Bashar Al Assad opened the Congress June 6 with a call to improve the economy and fight corruption, but without any mention of political reform. Longtime Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam resigned during the opening session.

The Syrian government has arrested at least 14 human rights activists during the past month. Nine were members of the Al Atassi forum, one of the few sanctioned non-governmental organizations in the country. Writer Ali Abdallah was arrested on May 15 after reading a statement by the exiled leader of the banned Muslim Brotherhood at the forum's meeting in Damascus on May 7. The statement called on the Syrian government to respect human rights and initiate electoral reform. Eight members who had attended the meeting were also detained without charge on May 24 and released six days later. Other detainees include Muhammad Raadoun, head of the Syrian branch of the Arab Organization for Human Rights, and Aktham Nuayse, president of the Committee for the Defense of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights, both charged with "disseminating false information." All detainees have been denied access to lawyers and will most likely be tried by the Syrian State Security Court, a government-controlled tribunal whose procedures have been criticized by the United Nations for violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. For more information on the arrests, click [here](#).

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Kuwait: Women Get the Vote

The Kuwaiti parliament passed a law on May 16, 2005 to amend the electoral law and allow women the right to vote and

run for office. The vote, which passed 35 to 23 with one abstention, came as a surprise after parliament had denied women the right to participate in municipal elections only two weeks earlier. As part of a deal on the legislation, Islamist and conservative MPs added a clause requiring women to “abide by Islamic law when voting and campaigning,” the implications of which are still unclear. According to observers, the Kuwaiti cabinet approved a pay increase for government employees and pensioners on the same day in an effort to win over some opponents to the amendment.

Although the amendment came too late for women to participate in the municipal elections on June 2, the Emir appointed two women to the 16-seat member municipal council. Voters elect ten members and the Emir appoints the remaining six. Women will vote for the first time in the 2007 parliamentary elections.

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Saudi Arabia: Reformers Convicted

Well-known Saudi reform activists Matrouk Al Faleh, Ali Al Dimeeni, and Abdullah Al Hamed received prison sentences ranging from six to nine years on May 15. They were convicted on charges of sowing dissent, distributing political leaflets, using the media to incite opposition against the government, and causing political unrest, after they circulated a petition in January 2004 calling for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Ten other activists who were arrested along with them in March 2004 were later released after signing pledges not to circulate reform petitions or speak to the media.

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Bahrain: Controversial Counterterrorism Law, Family Courts Challenged

A new draft law on counterterrorism is the subject of heated debate in Bahrain. Non-governmental organizations and reform activists have criticized the law, submitted by the government to parliament for “urgent consideration” in March 2005, on the grounds that it would allow authorities to restrict political liberties. In a **report** to the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) on May 11, the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) asserted the law includes “broad definitions of terrorism and terrorist organizations which threaten freedoms such as freedom of assembly and expression or the right to strike; widens the scope of applicability of the death penalty, and grants special prosecutorial powers with regard to such crimes.” The CAT issued a list of **recommendations** to the Bahraini government and also suggested the government amend Decree 56 of 2002, which gives impunity to officials who perpetrate or acquiesce in torture.

In another development, prominent feminist Ghada Jamsheer has been charged with slander for accusing family court judges in Bahrain of being “corrupt, biased, and unqualified” and calling a specific judge “rude and unfair.” If convicted, she faces up to 15 years in prison. Separate sharia courts for Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Bahrain hear personal status cases, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance cases. There are no codified personal status laws, allowing judges to render judgments according to their own reading of Islamic law. Click **here** to read a Human Rights Watch report on the case.

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Yemen: Controversial Media Law

Yemen 's Ministry of Information is drafting a new media law that, according to the minister, would abolish jail terms for journalists who criticize the president. Critics of the initiative point out that the law might still allow imprisonment on other charges, and say they fear it will introduce other new restrictions as part of a recent government campaign against journalists. The Yemeni government abandoned a previous draft media law in 2003 after strong criticism by press-freedom watchdog groups.

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Egypt: National Assembly for Democratic Transformation Formed

Human Rights Watch criticized the Egyptian government for “persistent violations of academic freedom” regarding public and private universities in a report entitled “Reading Between the ‘Red Lines’: The Prepression of Academic Freedom in Egyptian Universities,” released June 9. The 107-page **report** details government restrictions on classroom discussions, research projects, student activities, campus demonstrations, and university governance.

A group of Egyptian intellectuals have formed a “National Assembly for Democratic Transformation” (Al Tagammu Al Watani lil Tahawwul Al Dimuqrati) that aims to foster debate about a new constitution. According to the group's **mission statement** released on June 4, a “coordination committee” composed of prominent Egyptian figures will be formed first to consult with all political forces in the formation of the national front. The group, led by octogenarian former prime minister

Aziz Sidqi, includes members such as prominent Islamist intellectuals Tareq Al Bishri and Muhammad Salim Al Awwa, former deputy foreign minister Abdullah Al Ashal, and newspaper editor Mustafa Al Bakri as spokesman.

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Libya: Human Rights Watch Visit

The New York-based Human Rights Watch observed that while Libya has taken steps to improve its human rights record over the past year, serious problems remain. These include using violence against detainees, restricting freedom of expression and association, incarcerating political prisoners, and problems in the administration of justice. Click [here](#) to access the report released on May 23, 2005.

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Gulf Cooperation Council: Human Rights Report

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) announced on May 30 that beginning in 2006, it will issue annual reports on the human rights situation in the six member countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). According to GCC Secretary General Abdul Rahman Al Attiya, the initiative is a response to “erroneous information” about human rights in the region published by various state institutions and nongovernmental organizations. The GCC Secretariat General in Riyadh will create a new department, with help from civil society organizations in the member countries, to compile the reports.

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Upcoming Political Events

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- Iraq: U.S.-EU Conference in Brussels, June 22
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Views from the Arab Media

Columnist Salama Ahmed Salama discusses the recent constitutional referendum in Egypt in an **op-ed** in Egypt's *Al Ahram* on May 29, 2005. He criticizes the Egyptian government for exploiting the religious establishment as well as the media to press citizens to vote for the amendment, and urges opposition parties to speak up, as nothing will change if the ruling party is allowed to act alone.

In a **commentary** in *Al Hayat* on June 3, journalist Raghida Dargham argues that recent events in Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt demonstrate that constitutional and electoral reform are the only guarantees for democracy. She also criticizes Arab governments for not supporting the political process in Iraq.

In an op-ed **article** in *Ash-Sharq Al Awsat* on May 31, Sawsan Al Abtah claims too much domestic and international attention has been placed on Lebanon's parliamentary elections rather than on the real economic and political issues the country is facing. Instead of launching a new process of reform marked by political accountability, established politicians are playing the usual power games.

Al Jazeera's political debate show, “**Al Ittijah Al Mu'akis**” (The Opposite Direction), on May 24 pitted Ahmed Al Haj Ali, head of the central committee in the Syrian Baath Party, against Syrian dissident Said Abu Ghannam in a discussion about reform in Syria. Abu Ghannam asserted that the Syrian regime has no intention of introducing any political reforms, as demonstrated by the recent wave of arrests of civil society activists. Al Haj Ali countered that reforms will occur gradually and that those arrested were threatening Syria internally at a time when it is facing external threats.

Another *Al Jazeera* live show, “**Min Washington**” (From Washington), on June 2 brought together Egyptian intellectuals Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Amr Hamzawy, and Majdi Khalil to discuss US policy on reform in Egypt. Saad Eddin Ibrahim

highlighted unprecedented momentum within the U.S. administration, Congress, and the American media regarding pressing for political reform in Egypt. Amr Hamzawy, on the other hand, distinguished between the pro-reform views of Congress and the media, and the more pragmatic stance of the administration as it struggles to balance interests in the region.

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Read On

The Council on Foreign Relations released on June 8 an Independent Task Force Report entitled "**In Support of Arab Democracy: Why and How.**" The Task Force found that supporting the growth of democracy in the Middle East serves U.S. foreign policy goals because if citizens of Arab countries can express grievances freely and peacefully, they are more likely to build open and prosperous societies and less likely to support terrorism. The report makes specific recommendations for U.S. policy to promote political, economic, media, and educational reform in the Middle East.

In "Islamists and Democracy: Keep the Faith" (*The New Republic*, vol. 232, no. 4,716, June 6, 2005), Marina Ottaway argues that, if the United States wants to encourage democratization, it should seek to understand and support democratic trends within Islamist movements, the only groups with significant organized constituencies in much of the Middle East. In the same issue of *The New Republic*, Marisa Katz argues in "Democratease" that President Bush's rhetoric on democracy has not been backed by action, and Lawrence Kaplan counters in "Pressure Points" that it is not the Iraq war, but Bush administration policy that is responsible for recent progress toward democratization.

A number of works focus on developments in Iraq and implications for the region:

- A new report released by the International Crisis Group on June 8, 2005, "**Iraq Don't Rush the Constitution**," advises Iraqis to give themselves six additional months to draft a new constitution. While there are disadvantages to delay the process, they are far outweighed by the dangers of a hurried job. By involving a wide range of actors, the constitutional drafting process can serve as a positive tool for peace-building and reconciliation instead of perpetuating divisions and power struggles.
- In "**History Matters: Past as Prologue in Building Democracy in Iraq**," Eric Davis argues that restoring historical memory is a vital part of building a democratic Iraq (*Orbis*, vol. 49, no. 2, Spring 2005, 229-44). "Effective mobilization of the past, if done in a straightforward and non-romanticized fashion," according to Davis, "can help to inspire Iraqis to regain a sense of civic pride and trust in their ability to forge ahead with democratization."
- James Kurth's "Ignoring History: U.S. Democratization in the Muslim World" argues that the history of U.S. democratization projects suggests that efforts to bring democracy to Iraq will fail (*Orbis*, vol. 49, no. 2, Spring 2005, 305-22). This failure will discredit efforts at democratization elsewhere, Kurth predicts, leaving "Islamism as the only valid ideology and Islamization as the only vital political and social project."
- In "**Returning Exiles to Iraqi Politics**," Ariel Ahram argues that the struggle between Iraqi exiles—who have worked at formulating a national identity that transcends class and ethnic divisions—and those who never left Iraq will be a major step in resolving the country's contested national identity (*MERIA*, vol. 9, no. 1, March 2005).
- Khaled Salih reviews scenarios for Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria in "**What Future for the Kurds?**" noting that political elites in all four states face momentous decisions about the future of Kurdish populations (*MERIA*, vol. 9, no. 1, March 2005).

Two recent publications examine the prospects for Palestinian reform:

- In "**Evaluating Palestinian Reform**" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper no. 59, June 2005), Nathan Brown argues that despite detailed reform plans, institutions to ensure democracy are either absent or ailing. He proposes concrete steps to reform political parties, security services, the judiciary, and media.
- A new International Crisis Group (ICG) publication outlines the challenges Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas

faces on the eve of his visit to Washington. Among them is transforming the Palestinian political system through institution-building, genuine power sharing, and enforcing the rule of law (“[Mr. Abbas Goes to Washington: Can He Still Succeed?](#),” ICG, Middle East Briefing no. 17, May 24, 2005).

Commenting on the Egyptian Judges Club initiative to boycott their constitutionally- mandated role in supervising elections, Nathan Brown and Hesham Nasr argue that rather than representing a bold move toward regime change, it is a calibrated confrontation to secure judicial reform and support electoral reform (“[Egypt’s Judges Step Forward: The Judicial Election Boycott and Egyptian Reform](#),” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook, May 2005).

Several reports highlight human rights developments in the region:

- A new report released by the International Crisis Group on June 8, 2005, “[Iraq Don’t Rush the Constitution](#),” advises Iraqis to give themselves six additional months to draft a new constitution. While there are down sides to delay, they are far outweighed by the dangers of a hurried job. By involving a wide range of actors, the constitutional drafting process can serve as a positive tool for peace-building and reconciliation instead of perpetuating divisions and power struggles.
- According to a new Freedom House survey, “[Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice](#)” (May 20, 2005), women in the region face a systematic gender gap due to discriminatory laws and the lack of enforcement of existing laws that guarantee equality. The study evaluates the legal, political, and societal standing of women in 17 countries based on five categories: nondiscrimination, freedom of the person, economic rights, political rights, and social rights. Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco earned the highest ratings while Saudi Arabia scored the lowest in every category.
- Amnesty International’s annual report highlights human rights developments in 16 Arab countries in 2004. The [Middle East and North Africa Regional Overview](#) reports numerous human rights violations in the region, including the killing of hundreds of civilians in armed conflicts and political violence.
- In “[Lebanon: A Human Rights Agenda for the Parliamentary Elections](#)” published on May 18, 2005, Amnesty International reports that the Lebanese elections will provide an important opportunity for citizens to raise their human rights concerns with candidates. Areas needing reform, according to the report, include the justice sector, treatment of women and marginalized communities, the death penalty, impunity for past human rights violations, protection for human rights activities, and freedom of association.

The [Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies](#) is the new official publication of the [Association for Middle East Women’s Studies](#). It will be published three times a year.

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