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### **Arabian Peninsula: The Importance of Electoral Administration**

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Within the last few years, all of the countries on the Arabian Peninsula have held elections, whether local or national. While international trends and democracy promotion have played a part, internal political dynamics have motivated most elections. In Kuwait, for example, elections are propelled by an active parliamentary culture, whereas in other countries, monarchies have made limited concessions towards electoral inclusion to pre-empt broader reform. In all cases, elections are responding to a real popular demand for increased participation.

Citizens of Peninsula countries have shown enthusiasm—or lack thereof—for electoral processes depending on circumstances. In Qatar, the muted public reaction to the third extension of the current municipal Advisory Council until June 2008 (with a corresponding delay in any parliamentary elections until the end of 2008) might be interpreted as a lack of interest in elections. Yet in 1999, the first elections for the Advisory Council had a heavy voter turnout (between 75-85 percent), and 84 percent of the electorate turned out for the April 2003 constitutional referendum that created an elected parliament. By contrast, the turnout for the second Council elections in 2003 was only 30 percent. The dramatic drop in turnout from the first to second municipal elections—but active participation in the referendum—was likely due to the fact that the Council proved to have little actual power. In Bahrain, 90 percent of voters turned out for a 2001 referendum on the National Charter that seemed to augur broad political reforms. But after the 2002 Constitution disappointed those hopes, only 53 percent voted in parliamentary elections, boycotted by most opposition groups. Turnout then rose to 72 percent for the 2006 elections, in which several, but not all, opposition groups competed. When Peninsula voters feel that their votes will matter, they participate.

A key issue is whether voters view elections as being fairly administered by government bodies, even understanding that honest mistakes do happen. The extensive fraud exposed by a former civil servant with the Bahraini government in the “Bandargate” scandal, along with alleged fixing of

specific races in the 2006 elections, has deprived the electoral process of credibility in the eyes of many Bahrainis. On the other hand, many view the administration of vigorously-competed elections in Kuwait as the most technically proficient in the Peninsula, despite the fact that they are run by a technical cadre within the Ministry of Interior.

In most of the world, independent nonpartisan commissions run the best elections, with the United States a notable exception needing correction. In the Peninsula, however, only Yemen has begun the process of building such a commission.

A neutral and trusted election administrator can facilitate discussions among participants in ways that government officials cannot. Opposition groups in the Arabian Peninsula often do not trust what they view as self-interested monarchies, while rulers have been reluctant to allow political parties for fear of losing control. Questions of citizenship, qualification, and who should be on the voter registry have also been contentious. In most parts of the world, an election commission provides a useful forum to deal with these questions, allowing discussions to occur in a less hostile manner and drawing on broader experiences.

A nonpartisan election commission could also help deal with the complicated issue of the role of the military in elections. In Yemeni and Bahraini elections, soldiers seem to have been strategically deployed to vote in particular districts. In Qatar, the problem is that some 20 percent of the population that serves in the armed forces and police is disenfranchised, although the Ministry of Interior's military staff administers the elections. Qatari police and military officers are now hoping to be given the vote via a new election law currently being considered by the Advisory Council, but this seems unlikely to occur. Tensions in Kuwait are slightly different; members of the military in services connected directly to the royal family are eligible to vote, whereas those in regular services are not. While an independent nonpartisan election commission could not automatically resolve such issues, it could draw on established best practices and examples of how other commissions have addressed similar problems.

Rulers in the Arabian Peninsula maintain a broad array of tools to control political life, not the least of which are appointed chambers in their legislatures that balance out elected ones. But as demands for political participation grow gradually, popular elections increasingly are in a unique position to grant legitimacy. For such elections to enjoy credibility and draw significant voter participation, countries of the region need to move toward the creation of nonpartisan election administration bodies.

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