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U.S. Policy and Yemen: Balancing Realism and Reform on the Arab Periphery

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In an ironic turn of events, Yemen's September 20 presidential and local elections garnered extensive favorable coverage by the normally critical *Al Jazeera*, while they received only scant attention from the U.S. government, heretofore eager to highlight any sign of reform in Arab states. Why did U.S. officials refrain from highlighting what many foreign observers have praised as successful elections? Possible explanations include a return to traditional priorities in which security interests supersede democracy promotion, a calculated U.S. effort to promote Arab reform more quietly, or simply an oversight due to other distractions.

Yemen, a resource-poor Arab country situated at a healthy distance from the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is a crucible of sorts for U.S. attempts to strike a balance between reform and other goals. U.S.-Yemeni bilateral security and intelligence cooperation has been, and remains, the top U.S. priority. Since the 2000 Al Qaeda attack on the USS Cole, the United States has helped Yemen build its coast guard to patrol the Bab Al Mandab and to meet an Al Qaeda-inspired terrorist threat that recent events demonstrate to be very real. On September 19, the day before the elections, Yemeni security forces thwarted two terrorist attacks against oil installations in the northeastern region of Maarib and on the Gulf of Aden coast at Dhabba.

In Yemen the United States also faces the challenges of mixing encouragement and criticism of Arab regimes' liberalization efforts and of deciding how to deal with Islamists. This is also true in Morocco and parts of the Persian Gulf, where U.S. officials are quietly urging liberalization. U.S. policy toward engaging certain Islamist movements is left somewhat vague—perhaps deliberately so—but there are efforts being made to maintain contacts with moderate, non-violent Islamist factions. In Yemen members of the Islah party (a coalition of old guard Muslim Brotherhood members, Salafists, and tribes) appear to welcome dialogue on reform and have participated, along with other Yemeni political parties, in programs

sponsored by the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute. Still U.S. officials exercise caution, as the leader of the Salafist strain of Islah, Shaykh Abd Al Majid Al Zindani, has been designated as a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department for his alleged role in providing financial support to Al Qaeda operations and recruitment.

The Yemeni presidential election was about more than just esoteric notions of political reform; it was about the real issue of presidential succession. As in Egypt, where speculation abounds over the grooming of Gamal Mubarak for succession, there is widespread concern among Yemen's opposition parties over the prospect of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's 37-year old son Ahmed inheriting the reins of power. This fear was among the main motivations that brought Yemen's diverse opposition parties— socialists, Islamists, and Baathists— together in this year's elections. In a recent *Washington Post* interview, opposition presidential candidate Faisal Bin Shamlan (who received 21 percent of the vote) remarked that "We subordinated our ideological agendas to the one thing we all had in common, which was a realization that political reform was a necessity if we were to save democracy in Yemen and stop the country's descent into endemic corruption."

President Saleh's victory surprised no one; he is a populist leader who appeals to the everyman, and the ruling party's overwhelming resource advantage helped him considerably. Despite opposition allegations of fraud, foreign observers released preliminary conclusions that the election was relatively free and fair with the typical shortcomings seen in developing nations: there were breaches in voting secrecy, underage voters, and a number of inaccuracies in the voting registry. U.S. government officials were clearly encouraged by the relatively smooth election, believing that process is important despite imperfections.

The key policy question now is whether the Yemeni government will derive any tangible benefits from holding the election. In November 2005, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) suspended Yemen's eligibility for assistance under its Threshold Program, concluding that after Yemen was named as a potential aid candidate in fiscal year 2004, corruption in the country had increased. Yemen can reapply in November of this year.

Despite the upcoming MCC decision, Yemen remains largely absent in public U.S. policy discussions regarding democratization. Regime-manipulated political reform is but one malady in a long list of Yemen's socio-economic problems. The country is still recovering from civil war and re-unification, and it has enormous social challenges including endemic poverty, high rates of illiteracy, and water depletion. Yet, in a sense, the general lack of U.S. attention to Yemen in itself creates opportunities. Unlike U.S. relations with more strategically important countries such as Egypt, U.S.-Yemeni relations are not under a microscope, giving policymakers on the ground flexibility and freedom to experiment.

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