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**POLITICAL
REFORM IN
THE ARAB
WORLD:
A New
Ferment?**

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Rule of Law Project**

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IN THE THREE YEARS SINCE THE TERRORIST ATTACKS of September 11, 2001, the question of Arab reform not only has become closely linked in the minds of Western policy makers to the fight against Al Qaeda, but also has become a dominant theme of discussion in the region itself. Arab satellite television stations broadcast talk shows featuring vigorous discussions about the persistence of authoritarian rule in Arab countries and the incompetence of incumbent regimes. The opinion pages of Arab newspapers are replete with articles championing democratic reform as the only way to strengthen the region against Western control, or, conversely, to connect it with globalization and "modernity." Civil society groups, political parties, and even business organizations are promulgating reform manifestos with increasing regularity. Political reform is also the focus of heated debates in unexpected circles such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudi royal family. All Arab governments have acknowledged the need for reform in principle (some have even talked of democracy), and many have announced their own reform initiatives.

The nascent reform trend has inspired optimistic predictions that the region is finally responding to the global trend toward democracy. Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim, one of the Arab world's best-known democracy activists, argues that the prospects for liberal democracy in the region have never been so bright.[1] Influential American journalist Fareed Zakaria concluded after a visit to the region that "everywhere in the Arab world, people are talking about reform . . . the wind is behind those who advocate free-market, modern, Western-style reforms."[2] And in 2003 and 2004, President George W. Bush spoke of Arab democratization as a certainty. As he declared in a June 2004 speech, "voices in that region are increasingly demanding reform and democratic change . . . now freedom is stirring in the Middle East and no one should bet against it."[3]

Such enthusiasm about the inevitability of democratic change in the Middle East is premature. So far, talk about reform exceeds actual reform implemented, and the reforms that Arab governments have actually carried out in the past three years are quite modest and do not affect their fundamentally authoritarian character. Furthermore, there is no popular movement for democratic change in the Arab world, only a growing willingness among some members of the elite to question existing systems and deliberate future options.

Nonetheless, an important debate about political change is clearly under way. The point at which discourse penetrates the surface of politics and reshapes norms and values on a broad scale is difficult to predict, and the context for reform varies considerably from country to country. But the ferment is real and should not be dismissed as inconsequential.[4]

THE LONG ROAD

Some Western commentators have portrayed the Arab world as a politically stagnant region that suddenly awakened to the idea of change in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Such a depiction is quite misleading. With the exception, until recently, of the Gulf countries, Arab states have been buffeted by strong currents of political change throughout the twentieth century. The first half of the century was a period of considerable instability. In the space of a few decades, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Britain and France successfully asserted control over much of the region, though some states gained or retained nominal independence. The new imperial arrangements were often sharply contested, however, and the European imperial presence began to decline after the Second World War. Nationalism, often with a liberal, secular ethos, was the dominant factor in Arab politics during this period. By mid-century, particularly after the 1952 Free Officers' coup and the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, liberalism receded and ideologies of Arab socialism and pan-Arabism took hold, inspiring efforts to reshape political systems into one-party states with centrally controlled economies. By the 1980s and 1990s, as regimes faced the twin challenges of economic contraction and Islamist opposition movements, a mild liberalizing trend reemerged. Seeking to shore up their legitimacy, many rulers experimented with heavily manipulated multiparty elections and lifted some controls on political activity. Civic organizations dedicated to democracy and human rights, along with pan-Arab satellite television stations and other forms of new, more open media, came into being across the region during these years.

Political reform—at least demands for it by domestic critics of Arab regimes and pledges of it by rulers in times of crisis—has been a recurring motif in modern Arab politics. For example, since the early twentieth century, Islamic fundamentalists have urged reform according to "authentic" Islamic principles—to fight what they see as the deterioration of Arab society resulting from Western influences. In Egypt, after calls for reform from judges and intellectuals following the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, President Nasser tried to regain his credibility by announcing limited political reforms. Demands for governance changes and anticorruption measures have convulsed the Palestinian national movement at critical junctures in the conflict with Israel. And in the 1980s and 1990s, as mentioned above, many Arab rulers adopted the rhetoric and sometimes the trappings of democracy to bolster their credentials in the face of mounting socioeconomic problems.

Calls for reform have surged and receded, however, without altering the core of authoritarian rule. Governments often have used promises of reform as a smokescreen for inaction. By 2001, the Arab world remained the least free and democratic region of the world, according to the annual surveys of the watchdog group Freedom House and the evaluations of most other analysts.[5] Liberalization programs stalled or were reversed in most countries as Arab regimes manipulated openings and closings to maintain their grip on power. To be sure, throughout the 1990s voices across the region, mainly liberal intellectuals and civil society activists, called for democracy. But they usually spoke in cautious, vague terms to avoid overstepping the narrow bounds of tolerated public discourse. They were only marginal voices in a political milieu in which pan-Arab causes such as Palestine dominated the regional agenda and any suggestion that reform should be the Arabs' priority was widely viewed as tantamount to a betrayal of such causes.

The reform ferment of the post–September 11 period represents an evolution of this earlier liberalizing trend, rather than a wholly new stage in Arab politics. Three characteristics mark the present reform environment. First, political reform has become a topic of regional concern.

Advocates of democracy from most Arab countries are speaking out in the pan-Arab media and at regional conferences. Almost every Arab government has committed itself rhetorically to the concept of reform, and the issue has forced itself onto the agenda of Arab League summits and other such conclaves for the first time. This geographic broadening has had a magnifying effect on calls for reform in individual countries as Arab governments compete with one another to show a reformist face to the world, and civic activists feel solidarity with their counterparts across the region. Second, the boundaries of discourse have expanded. Liberal democrats are the most outspoken, openly raising previously taboo issues such as instituting term limits for Arab rulers and lifting emergency laws. Third, voices challenging the very need for reform are somewhat fainter. Although the Palestinian and Iraqi causes remain staples of Arab political discourse, the current debate revolves more around what reforms are needed and the role of outsiders, particularly the United States, in supporting change, than around whether change is necessary at all.

EXTERNAL PRESSURES

A combination of factors has stimulated the current reform ferment, including developments in the Arab world itself and the unprecedented international pressure for change spurred by the events of September 11. Although the internal factors carry the most weight, it is worth considering the external pressures first, because they are in a sense the most visible and novel.

Within days of the September 11 attacks, the previously obscure topic of the Arab world's "democracy deficit" suddenly became the focus of wide discussion in Western media and policy circles. A chorus of commentators, mainly in the United States, blamed the spread of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and the rise of politically militant Islamic fundamentalist movements on political repression and economic stagnation in Arab countries. Neoconservative analysts in particular criticized autocratic Arab governments, including close U.S. allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for spawning radical groups and stifling moderates. Likening the fight against Al Qaeda to a Manichean struggle in which the United States is the savior of Western civilization, neoconservatives appealed to the Bush administration to make the democratic transformation of the Middle East a cornerstone of the war on terrorism.

The Bush administration basically accepted this analysis of the roots of terrorism. It responded to the suddenly pervasive question "why do they hate us?" by putting the responsibility, and thus the onus of change, on Arab regimes rather than on the United States. (An alternative answer to the question, that animosity toward the United States stemmed at least in part from its policies in the Middle East, was more threatening, because it implied that the United States had contributed to the rise of terrorism and should reconsider its policies.) The idea of promoting democracy as an antidote to terrorism gained the endorsement of the realist camp in the administration and attracted mild bipartisan support in Congress. Democracy promotion in the Middle East thus became for the first time an important professed tenet of the United States' Middle East policy.

Until now at least, the main thrust of the new policy has been exhortatory rhetoric. President Bush and his top aides spoke regularly in 2003 and 2004 about the need for liberty and freedom to take hold in the Middle East, declared America's commitment to support voices of reform in the region, praised Arab leaders who have carried out reforms, and gently called on others to do so. The

administration's most extensive articulation of its democracy-promotion policy came in a November 2003 speech at the National Endowment for Democracy in which President Bush announced that his administration was replacing the long-standing U.S. policy of unquestioning support for friendly authoritarian Arab regimes with a new "forward strategy of freedom" for the Middle East. The old policy, he stated, had brought stability but had failed to protect U.S. national security.

In addition, the Bush administration frequently invoked Arab reform in the context of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. The administration maintained that toppling Saddam Hussein and implanting a democratic government in Iraq would inspire a wave of democratic change throughout the Middle East. This assertion aimed not only to offer a rationale for the war to the American public, but also to signal to Arab regimes that the United States is no longer wedded to upholding the region's undemocratic status quo.

Although the leading edge of the new policy is rhetoric, some diplomatic and aid initiatives have been launched. Political reform has edged its way onto the list of talking points for meetings with Arab leaders, and senior U.S. officials have made visits to the region centered on reform issues. New assistance programs include the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), launched in December 2002, and the White House's Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, formally unveiled at the June 2004 Group of Eight industrialized nations (G-8) summit at Sea Island, Georgia. MEPI funds political, economic, and educational reform programs in Arab countries. The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative is more ambitious, offering a U.S.–European framework for democracy promotion and proposing, among other initiatives, a new democracy fund and a regional forum for dialogue on reform among donors, Arab governments, and Arab civil society groups.

The U.S. government has also pursued the goal of democracy promotion through new public diplomacy programs, including radio and television stations, that deliver prodemocracy and pro-American messages to Arab audiences. Outside the administration, a growing interest in reform among members of Congress, along with the post–September 11 proliferation of American media reports, task forces, conferences, research programs, and other private initiatives on Arab democracy, represents additional forms of external pressure.

Arab governments and publics have reacted to this collective stream of unflattering attention on two levels. On one level, they have exhibited hostility and defensiveness. They have reacted with particular scorn to Washington's attempt to recast itself as a champion of democracy and as the friend of all Arab reformers. Such hostility is hardly a surprise given the unfriendliness of the environment into which the Bush administration was attempting to project its democracy message. Long-standing Arab suspicion of U.S. motives in the region was only exacerbated by the administration's unconditional support for controversial Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. On a second, deeper level, despite mistrust of the messenger, many government officials and other members of the elite have basically accepted the message that Arab countries need positive political, economic, and social change. Thus, as U.S. rhetoric on democracy became more prominent in 2003 and 2004, domestic opponents of Arab regimes coupled their criticisms of U.S. policy with calls for reform. Some Arabs who had privately supported democratic reform but had hesitated to voice their opinions publicly were also emboldened to weigh in. For their part, Arab rulers, suddenly no longer able to depend on the protection offered by U.S. silence about their poor governance and human rights records, found it difficult to reject such criticism outright as they had long done.

The U.S. occupation of Iraq added to the reform ferment, but not, as the Bush administration had predicted, by providing an inspirational democratic model. Instead, the Iraq war influenced the reform environment in other ways. Widespread anger over the war and over Arab governments' inability to prevent it exposed the governments to fresh charges of incompetence from their citizenry and to new expressions of discontent with the status quo. The war also enhanced many Arab governments' desire to portray themselves internationally as reformers. They sought to demonstrate that, unlike Saddam Hussein, they cared for the well-being of their citizens and thus should not be considered targets of future U.S. interventions, occupations, and social transformations launched in the name of human rights. Arab civil society groups and opposition parties also started to put forward their own reform initiatives in 2003 and 2004. They too sought to seize the reform agenda from the United States to counter neoconservative suggestions that the Middle East was a passive region subject to impending transformation by the West.

These tensions were particularly acute in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—close U.S. allies that had officially opposed the invasion but provided behind-the-scenes military assistance to the United States. In the months after the toppling of the Iraqi regime, Jordan moved to appease popular discontent by holding long-delayed legislative elections. The Saudi government launched a national dialogue on reform and announced its intention to hold the kingdom's first nationwide municipal elections, in which half of the members of municipal councils will be elected. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak pushed a package of modest political reforms through parliament, the first such reforms the government had carried out in more than a decade.

INTERNAL FACTORS

External pressure alone would not have been sufficient to trigger a debate about reform in the absence of domestic factors that pushed a majority of Arab governments to accept the necessity of change and that emboldened domestic critics to speak up more openly.

From the point of view of the governments in the region, the preponderant factor that made them more amenable to the idea of reform was a combination of fear of the upsurge of terrorism and the realization that security measures, while necessary, would not be sufficient to combat radical groups. September 11 stunned not only the United States, but many Arab governments as well. Saudi Arabia was particularly shocked to discover how many of the perpetrators were Saudi citizens. Initially unwilling to believe that the information was correct, the Saudi government finally had to accept the evidence, particularly after terrorist attacks began occurring inside the Kingdom itself in 2003. Yemen had recognized the degree to which terrorists operated in the country with the attack on the *U.S.S. Cole* warship in 2000. Algeria had been battling Islamist terrorism for years. Morocco experienced a major terrorist incident in Casablanca in 2003, and Jordan foiled several plots in the past few years. Only Egypt, which had experienced its wave of terrorism earlier, appeared to have the situation under control, at least for the time being.

The reaction in all countries was to heighten security measures, which further constrained Arab citizens' already limited civil and political rights, yet also to acknowledge the need for reform and in some cases to carry out reforms. It is difficult to judge to what extent this reform impulse was based simply on a desire to project a more benign image abroad and to what extent Arab governments

accepted the U.S. administration's argument that domestic repression was in itself a main cause of radicalism and terrorism. Given the limited nature of the reforms that most governments have introduced, the former appears more likely than the latter.

Some countries, furthermore, were experiencing political pressures unrelated to the threat of terrorism that forced them to face the necessity of change. Egypt was moving toward a succession crisis because of President Mubarak's advancing age and failure to appoint a vice president. Jordan, with more than half of its population of Palestinian origin, was confronted by widespread anger among its citizens because the government was maintaining its peace treaty with Israel while Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza were under siege. Algeria was trying to reconstruct a political system that could maintain a fragile peace after a civil war between government forces and radical Islamist groups throughout the 1990s. The Gulf countries were contending with the challenge of adapting political systems originally designed to control poor, backward societies to govern increasingly educated populations seeking to join the global economy. Across the region, governments faced huge gaps between the number of entrants into the job market and the number of jobs available, education systems that failed to produce graduates suited for the needs of the global economy, and paltry foreign direct investment outside the oil and gas sectors. For all Arab governments, in other words, socioeconomic and political pressures building during the 1980s and 1990s were intensifying at the time of the September 11 attacks, making reform a necessity.

The publication in May 2002 of the United Nations Development Program's *Arab Human Development Report* enhanced the legitimacy of reform as a pressing pan-Arab issue. Highly critical of Arab regimes, the report denounced the deficits of education, good governance, freedom, and women's empowerment and described political and economic reform as essential to solving the multiple crises facing the region. The document's credibility derived from the fact that it was written by well-respected Arabs but also had the authority of the United Nations behind it. Arab governments simply could not ignore the report as they had previously managed to do with less prestigious critiques, and they set up a committee in the Arab League to study its recommendations.

Another factor that helps to explain why at least some Arab governments were more willing to talk about reform was the recent coming to power of four younger leaders: King Abdullah II in Jordan, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in Bahrain, King Muhammad VI in Morocco, and Bashar Al Assad in Syria. The three kings rose to the throne in 1999, and Bashar succeeded his father the following year. Upon assuming power, each leader tried to establish his legitimacy by enveloping himself in the rhetoric of reform. However, the expectation that the change of leadership would usher in a period of sweeping political change was quickly dashed in all four countries. A mixture of personal inclination to consolidate power and an unwillingness or inability to take on the old guard in their respective governments stymied the reform process in Syria and greatly constrained it in Jordan. A reformist trend is still alive in Bahrain and Morocco, although reforms have been modest so far. But the change of generations—along with an impending leadership change in Egypt—has helped to foster a new climate in which some domestic issues are now more open to discussion.

In addition, the declining appeal among many secular intellectuals and opposition groups of old ideologies such as pan-Arabism and Arab socialism has generated greater receptivity to the idea of liberal politics and democratic reform. Statistics that showed how the Arab world was lagging behind almost every other region of the world politically and economically were humiliating, all the more so

because the evidence was irrefutable. Although most Arab intellectuals and activists remain hostile to reform proposals coming from the outside, in particular from the United States, they have become much more amenable to the idea that democracy is a legitimate aspiration of Arab societies.

A final factor has been the reformist trend within Islamist political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This trend—which has been unfolding over the past decade as mainstream Islamist groups have found radicalism and violence unhelpful to their cause and have sought new strategies to compete for political power—was accelerated by the attacks of September 11. Facing increased pressure from Arab governments and anxious to distance themselves from terrorist organizations, some Islamist groups have become more open to at least debate the merits of democracy.

REFORM IN THEORY

Although a consensus is forming within the region's political elite that political reform is necessary, there is no corresponding agreement on what political reform means. Instead, reform has become a widely used mantra covering very different perspectives.

One such perspective is the liberal democratic outlook, which defines political reform as the process needed to establish secular, Western-style democratic republics or genuine constitutional monarchies. Exponents of this liberal perspective call on Arab rulers to submit to constitutional restrictions on their power, to the will of the people in free, fair, and regular elections, and to term limits. They also demand abrogating emergency laws and security courts, expanding human rights (especially rights for women), ending state control over media, lifting restrictions on political parties and civic organizations, establishing independent judiciaries, and respecting the rule of law. The breadth and assertiveness of this agenda reflect the degree to which liberal voices have been emboldened since September 11, as many of these demands, particularly those relating to the powers of Arab rulers, were previously too dangerous to express.

Advocates of the liberal agenda include intellectuals, journalists, human rights and democracy activists, members of secular opposition parties, and a tiny number of businessmen and progressive-minded government officials. Many were educated in the United States or Europe and have ties to Western political, academic, and business circles; some are former leftists who became disillusioned with Arab nationalism and socialism. The declaration issued in March 2004 by a group composed mainly of intellectuals, former diplomats, and businessmen at a conference held at the quasigovernmental Alexandria Library in Egypt exemplifies the liberal democratic perspective.[6] The Bush administration and the Western media heralded the declaration as a sign of the emergence of a genuine liberal democratic movement within Arab civil society. In fact, however, the Alexandria meeting illustrates the weakness of the liberal trend. The Egyptian government carefully screened all participants to exclude any genuine opposition figures or critics and filled the roster with individuals who lack connections to membership-based organizations that might serve as a mobilizing base for the declaration.

A second perspective on reform is the one held by moderate Islamists, a minority but important camp within the Islamist movement. Moderate Islamists echo some of the liberals' core reform demands, such as free elections, term limits, and empowered elected institutions. But they are

adamant that political reform must accord with Islamic law and customs. It is difficult to know exactly what this means, given the existence of various schools of Islamic jurisprudence, each with its more liberal or fundamentalist interpretations. In general, however, those who insist that reform must conform to Islamic law tend to deemphasize individual rights, especially those for women and minorities, and to hold vague positions on the principle of rotation of power. More broadly, and of greater concern to supporters of liberal democracy, even moderate Islamists envision political reform as a pathway to the creation of "authentic" Islamic states governed by religious law, not Western-style democracies ruled by secular laws. Instead of looking to the West for models, moderate Islamists share with the broader Islamist movement a determination to stem the penetration of Arab societies by Western secular values, economic domination, and political influence. They envision reform as a way to strengthen these societies against such corruption and "hegemony." The most detailed articulation of the moderate Islamic perspective to emerge from the current reform debate is found in the initiative published by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in March 2004. The document includes a nineteen-point section on political reform and calls for a "republican, constitutional, parliamentary, democratic state in conformity with the principles of Islam" to replace the present Egyptian government.[7]

A third perspective is the modernization approach, advocated by many Arab regimes and their supporters in the government-linked intelligentsia and the private sector. Generally speaking, the modernization agenda features good governance reforms such as upgrading the judiciary, streamlining bureaucratic procedures, and fighting corruption. It also calls for increasing political participation, especially among women and youth, "activating" civil society (meaning development and welfare organizations, not politically oriented groups), expanding human rights education, and lifting some controls on the media. In addition to endorsing such steps, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco have announced plans to revise legislation concerning political participation. The exact content of such reforms is not yet clear, but measures reportedly under consideration in Egypt include allowing opposition party representatives to sit on the committee that oversees party registration; in Morocco, imposing new restrictions on financing and establishment of religious or ethnic-based parties; and in Jordan, introducing mandatory voting and consolidating the country's many small parties into three large blocs of left, right, and center.

Advocates of the modernization perspective sometimes invoke the word *democracy*, but they portray it as a system that already exists in the Arab world and needs only some procedural improvements and greater infusions of popular participation to function properly. Thus, the modernizing perspective rejects the notion advanced by liberals that democracy would be a new, radically different system that would change the character of Arab states dramatically and in particular that would require rulers to submit to the will of the people. Instead, it emphasizes the need for gradual change carried out in accordance with the circumstances and culture of each country. The objective of modernizing reforms, then, is to develop more efficiently governed and economically successful versions of existing states, with their existing power structures. The Arab League's May 2004 declaration on reform and the June 2003 reform initiative of the Arab Business Council, a group composed of some of the region's wealthiest businessmen, both capture the gist of the modernization perspective.[8]

A crosscutting theme among the three perspectives is the rejection of, or at best a very grudging attitude toward, the role of outsiders, especially the United States, in promoting reform. A small

minority of supporters of the liberal perspective endorse U.S. involvement.[9] Most liberals, however, accept the value of Western institutions and practices but sharply reject any role for the United States. Moderate Islamists are almost universally deeply hostile to outside interference, particularly from the United States. Indeed, the first item in the Muslim Brotherhood's reform plan refers to the need to reject all foreign-generated reform plans as interference in Egyptian affairs. Proponents of the modernization agenda are divided on the issue of Western involvement. The governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria have made a point of rejecting outside recommendations on reform, criticizing the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative in particular as a Western attempt to impose change. Other governments are less harsh. They repeatedly state the need to pursue only indigenous plans for reform but are favorable to outside assistance if appropriate. Only the Jordanian government has directly welcomed U.S. support for reform, even creating a ministry of political development to coordinate foreign reform aid.

REFORM IN PRACTICE

The lively, often quite far-reaching debates about reform in the Arab world are only palely reflected in the actual changes that have been introduced to date by Arab states. Most of the political reforms enacted in the past three years are piecemeal measures that fall into the "modernization" category. Furthermore, reforms have been introduced from the top, by governments acting on their own initiative rather than in response to specific demands from their citizens. Some governments, such as in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have organized national dialogues on reform, but participants and topics discussed at such gatherings are tightly controlled. They are primarily public relations exercises and opportunities for carefully selected members of the elite to blow off steam. Attempts by citizens to petition their governments for change have met with mostly vague responses or with arrests and pressures on the petitioners to desist from further activities. Notably, the rulers of Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen have made general statements in support of reform but have not yet implemented any significant measures.

Since September 11, only in two countries, Bahrain and Qatar, have governments implemented reforms that seek to change the overall structure of the political system. In Bahrain, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa continued his program, embarked on soon after his assuming power, of transforming his country into a constitutional monarchy and reducing long-running, sometimes violent tensions between members of the majority Shiite community and the ruling Sunni minority. In February 2002, following reforms in 2000 and 2001 that repealed emergency laws, abolished special security courts, and granted amnesty to opposition activists, Hamad promulgated decrees that guarantee the right of association, speech, and participation for all Bahrainis and launched a process to restore the elected parliament, which had been suspended since 1975. Hamad also transformed Bahrain into a monarchy with himself as king and created an upper house of parliament with full legislative powers. Bahrain held elections for municipal councils in May 2002 and for the lower house of parliament in October 2002—the first elections held in Bahrain in twenty-eight years.

Qatar has also carried out reforms that are significant when measured against its history as a state with no elected legislative bodies or constitutionally guaranteed rights. In April 2003, the country's first constitution was approved in a national referendum. The document, drafted by a committee

of experts appointed by Emir Hamad bin Jassem Khalifa Al Thani, creates a parliament with thirty elected members (fifteen others are to be appointed by the emir) and with some legislative powers. The constitution also grants political and civil rights to men and women and enshrines a range of other freedoms.

These reforms have established needed participatory institutions and have fostered a more open political climate in each country. Bahrain's case is a particular achievement, as reforms have revived political life frozen since the mid-1970s and greatly reduced strife. But as positive as these changes are, in neither country has the reform process led to a reduction of the powers of the leader or otherwise created a pathway for a democratically elected leadership. Each country's rulers and their families continue to govern and to control national wealth with essentially unchecked powers. Political parties remain illegal in both countries. Only time will tell whether either ruler intends eventually to divest himself of the power to govern, or whether he simply believes that the enactment of a constitution has already transformed the country into a constitutional monarchy.

No other government has attempted a restructuring of the political system, not even one that ensures the continuing power of the executive as in Bahrain and Qatar. In other countries, post–September 11 reforms have been more narrowly focused and cautious, even to the point of being cosmetic. These reforms have mostly been targeted at elections, women's rights, and human rights, more generally.

Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Yemen have revised their electoral laws and upgraded their electoral administration to make voter registration, balloting, vote counting, and the announcement of results more efficient and transparent. According to international observers, recent elections held in these countries were conducted more professionally than earlier contests and were marked by fewer cases of blatant government intimidation of voters or other obvious attempts to influence the outcome.

These improvements in electoral administration were not, however, accompanied by gains for opposition forces. On the contrary, with the exception of Morocco, in every national election held in the Arab world since September 11, ruling-party or progovernment candidates won by a wider margin, and opposition candidates had their poorest showings, since the introduction (or re-introduction, in some cases) of multiparty politics in the 1980s and 1990s.[10] Even in Morocco, where the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) became the third largest party represented in parliament after the 2002 elections, the top two parties essentially maintained their position, precluding any rotation of power. Across the region, though some parliamentarians have bravely challenged ruling regimes on sensitive issues, legislatures still lack the political and institutional capacity to shape policy and act as counterweights to the executive branch.

A second reform trend evident since 2001 is the enhancement of women's rights and measures to expand their presence in government. Many governments have enacted progressive "personal status" legislation—new laws pertaining to marriage and divorce, child custody, and inheritance that decrease traditional discrimination against women. Morocco has seen the most dramatic change in this regard. In January 2004 the parliament approved a major revision of the *Mudawwana* (personal status code) that significantly expanded women's rights in all these areas. Moroccan women's groups had been pressing for such a revision since the 1980s, as had King Muhammad VI since coming to power. But conservative Islamist forces had thwarted all attempts at reform, holding massive demonstrations that condemned the expansion of women's rights as anti-Islamic. The situation changed after the 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca, however, in which radical Islamic cells were

implicated. All Islamist groups, including the relatively moderate PJD, were put on the defensive politically, afraid to challenge the palace directly. As a result, the king was able to push through the reforms, even winning the endorsement of the PJD.

Egypt has introduced more modest reforms pertaining to women's rights. In a 2002 landmark decision, the judiciary ruled that women could travel abroad without the permission of their husbands or fathers. In 2004, parliament passed legislation granting citizenship to children born to Egyptian mothers and foreign fathers. The Jordanian government has also tried to enact legislation to increase penalties for violence against women and to expand women's divorce and inheritance rights, but conservative members of the lower house of parliament have repeatedly blocked such reforms.

Algeria, Jordan, and Morocco introduced electoral quotas to increase the number of women in parliament. In Oman, the first full-suffrage elections took place in October 2003, a vote that was the culmination of a process begun in 1991 of gradually expanding enfranchisement to all Omani adults. Finally, across the region, relatively large numbers of women have been appointed to judicial, ministerial, and diplomatic positions in the past two years.

Welcome as these advances for Arab women are, they should not be confused with democratizing moves. Marina Ottaway argues that reforms that expand women's rights in the Middle East do not address fundamental blockages to democratic change.[11] These include the overwhelming powers of Arab rulers, the absence or weakness of institutions to check those powers, and the denial of democratic rights to all citizens, male and female.

With regard to human rights reforms, many Arab governments have taken steps that signal a growing acceptance of human rights as a legitimate public policy issue. Morocco, which has shown the greatest inclination of any Arab country to improve its human rights record, took another step by forming the Equity and Reconciliation Commission in January 2004, an institution unique in the region. Its mandate is to produce a public report on state repression from 1956 to 1999 and to compensate the families of Moroccans who "disappeared" during these years. In another first, the Arab League at its May 2004 summit in Tunis approved revisions to the 1994 Arab Human Rights Charter that strengthen the rights to fair trial and political asylum, affirm prohibitions on torture, and endorse gender equality. Jordan and Egypt set up national human rights councils in 2002 and 2003, respectively. The purpose of the councils is to expand public awareness of human rights and to increase government compliance with international human rights conventions. In 2003 the Egyptian government also allowed the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights to register as a nongovernmental organization, after years of rejecting its requests. In 2004, Kuwait issued an operating license to a human rights organization for the first time. Even Saudi Arabia has made unprecedented gestures toward human rights, allowing Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International to visit the country for the first time in 2003 and establishing a quasigovernmental human rights group in 2004.

These steps have had little or no effect on systemic human rights problems across the Arab world. Emergency laws remain in place, including in Egypt where the government recently suppressed an attempt by members of the national human rights council to issue a recommendation that the twenty-three-year state of emergency be annulled. International human rights organizations report that human rights conditions in many countries have worsened.[12] One reason for this deterioration is that many Arab governments have undertaken broad antiterrorism actions after September 11, such

as mass detentions and heightened surveillance of political activity. Morocco, where human rights conditions improved during the 1990s, has experienced a regression in civil liberties since the 2003 Casablanca bombings and the March 11, 2004, attacks in Madrid, which were blamed on Moroccan extremists. The closer counterterrorism relationships established by Algeria, Syria, and Yemen with Western intelligence services and the strengthening of long-established ties to those services by Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia have done nothing to safeguard human rights. Repression of opposition to the Iraq war and to Israeli actions in the Palestinian territories has also negatively affected the human rights environment.

THE BALANCE SHEET

The issue of political reform has so far generated far more debate than actual democratizing change in the Arab world. The main reason is that reform is still closely controlled by authoritarian governments that, while eager to demonstrate to the international community that the Arab world is not as retrograde as it is often portrayed to be, feel under no immediate domestic pressure to introduce far-reaching reforms. For different reasons, neither advocates of liberal reform nor those who want to build Islamic states have been able to force governments to enact the changes they want.

Arab liberals, who are issuing the most pointed and extensive demands for democratic reform, are still weak and isolated. The increased attention that democracy enthusiasts outside the Middle East have paid to Arab liberals' activities in the past few years has magnified their significance in Western policy circles but has not increased their influence within the Arab world. Indeed, the attention paid to them by the Bush administration and by Western democracy advocates may isolate them even more within their own societies, where they are often denounced as too close to the United States. They remain a very elite group, repressed by regimes and operating primarily as individuals with no significant constituency. As a consequence, they are easily marginalized by Arab governments or, conversely, co-opted. Many end up working for reform within ruling parties, or concentrate their efforts on signing broad, regionwide reform manifestos. Many are less able, or less willing, to take an open stand on reform issues at home. Arab governments reinforce this caution by showing tolerance, or even approval, for regional meetings that issue general statements about democracy, while cracking down on domestic political activism that touches on specific issues of local concern, even when couched in the most polite form. For example, the Bahraini authorities arrested democracy activists for circulating a petition demanding constitutional reform, and the Saudi government is putting on trial prominent liberal reformers who called for a fully independent human rights commission.

The moderates within the Islamist camp who are calling for democratic reforms have gained prominence in the past three years, but their influence remains marginal within the Islamist movement. Their endorsements of democratic reform are directed as much to Western audiences as to their compatriots. They write about the need for democracy and issue statements to that effect, but there is no sign that democratic change has become a leading topic at Friday mosque sermons, a leading channel of mass communication throughout the Arab world. At the popular level, the dominant political theme preached by Islamists is still hostility toward U.S. policies and Western cultural influence. Moderate Islamists, furthermore, are as isolated outside Islamist circles as they are inside them. Arab governments do not trust them, fearing they are simply the more presentable

face of a radical movement that wants to grab power as soon as there is a democratic opening. Most democrats also remain suspicious. Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's fledgling attempts to build bridges to secular opposition parties in Egypt, the polarization between the liberal and Islamist camps remains, precluding the emergence of broad coalitions for democratic change. Western countries, furthermore, are hardly rushing to embrace moderate Islamists as partners for their vision of transforming the Middle East. The United States in particular appears even more wary about the inclusion of moderate Islamist groups than it was before the September 11 attacks.

This leaves incumbent regimes in control of the reform agenda, at least for now. As a result, they introduce measures that they believe will benefit their image in the outside world and may buy them time domestically but that do not infringe on their own power and prerogatives. They shrewdly allow their citizens to talk about reform as a safety valve for discontent, as the expansion of red lines of political discourse in the past few years demonstrates. So far, Arab regimes have proven quite adept at balancing the need to demonstrate to the world—and to some extent to their own citizens—their willingness to change, without allowing the reform process to gather a momentum they will not be able to stop.

Whether the reform ferment will remain largely in the sphere of discourse, or spur the beginning of a wide-reaching political shift toward democracy, depends on numerous factors. One is the capacity of liberal reformers to attract the popular support they are now sorely lacking, by developing an appealing social agenda to accompany their abstract political demands. Another is the ability of moderate Islamists to forge alliances with secular opposition forces and to gain influence within Islamist circles. A third factor is the future trajectory of the war on terrorism and the outcome of the situations in Iraq and Palestine. All are currently fueling anti-American sentiment that complicates the reform agenda by tainting in the popular mind its most vigorous proponents as agents of Western plans to undermine Islam. Finally, the willingness of the United States and other Western countries to press for democratization, rather than to accept modernizing measures as a sign of democratic progress, will help determine the long-term significance of the current reform ferment.

NOTES

1   Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "An Open Door," *Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 36–46.

2   Fareed Zakaria, "The Good, the Bad, the Ugly," *Newsweek*, May 31, 2004.

3   Remarks by George W. Bush at the Air Force Academy Graduation, Colorado Springs, Colorado, June 2, 2004, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040602.html.

4   This paper reviews recent developments in political reform across the Arab world, with the exception of the Palestinian territories and Iraq, which are special cases not considered here.

5   See, for example, Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2000–2001* (New York: 2001).

6   "The March 2004 Alexandria Document on Reform Issues in the Arab World," Alexandria, Egypt, March 14, 2004, available at http://www.bibalex.gov.eg. Other recent liberal reform declarations include the "Sanaa Declaration on Democracy, Human Rights, and the Role of the International Criminal Court," Sanaa, Yemen, January 12, 2004; "Letter from the First Civic Forum to the Fourth Arab Summit" (also known as the Beirut Declaration on Reform), Beirut, Lebanon, March 22, 2004; "Doha Declaration on Democracy and Reform," Doha, Qatar, June 4, 2004; and "Priorities and Mechanisms for Reform in the Arab World," Cairo, Egypt, July 7, 2004.

7   "The Muslim Brotherhood Reform Initiative," March 2004, available in Arabic at http://www.afaqarabiyya.com, a web site affiliated with the Brotherhood.

8   For the Arab Business Council's reform platform, see http://www.weforum.org/pdf/ABC/ABC_Achievements.pdf. For the Tunis Declaration issued by the Arab League on May 23, 2004, see http://www.arabsummit.tn/en/tunis-declaration.htm. For illustrative modernization platforms drafted by Arab governments, see "Draft Government Plan for Political Reform in Jordan," Amman, Jordan, March 2004; "Memorandum on Reforms in Algeria" (Algiers, Algeria: Office of the Presidency of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, June 2004); and the "New Vision" reform program of Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party, Cairo, Egypt, September 2003, available at http://www.ndp.org.eg/aboutus/en/aboutus_2_1.htm.

9   See "Priorities and Mechanisms for Reform."

10 Between September 2001 and April 2004, Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Yemen held parliamentary elections, and Algeria held presidential elections.

11 Marina Ottaway, "Women's Rights and Democracy in the Arab World," Carnegie Paper no. 42 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004).

12 See Human Rights Watch, *World Report: 2002* (New York: 2002), *World Report: 2003* (New York: 2003), and *World Report: 2004* (New York: 2004) and various country reports and press releases on Arab countries, 2001–2004. See also Middle East country reports issued by Amnesty International from 2002 to the present, especially "The Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula," June 22, 2004.

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