

Pushback or Progress?

Arab Regimes Respond to Democracy's Challenge

by [Barry Rubin \(/experts/barry-rubin\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



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Widespread Islamist gains -- from Hamas's ascension in Gaza to the Muslim Brotherhood's successes in Egypt -- seem to have muted the previously high-profile agenda of bringing democracy to Arab countries. In both Washington and the region itself, little confidence remains in the short-term viability of democratic reform in an environment where well-organized Islamist forces are prepared to exploit it. Lost amid these imposing gains, however, is the paramount reason for democracy's retreat: the varying responses of Arab regimes themselves. How have these regimes managed to use the various tools at their disposal -- including the co-optation of Islamist gains -- to effectively neutralize the democratic challenge? And what implications do their efforts hold for the future of Arab governance?

In this Washington Institute Policy Focus, Barry Rubin surveys the Arab government response to democratization efforts, whether homegrown or encouraged by the West. Using a broad array of examples from throughout the region, he examines both regime measures -- ranging from subtle social initiatives to outright repression -- and liberal and Islamist countermeasures. He also discusses how some regimes have responded positively to democratic pressures by attempting real reform. In all, he argues, these varying reactions will have a profound effect on the regimes' long-term stability -- and on those forces competing to reform or replace them.

- 26 pages

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