

Promoting Democratic Change in the Middle East

by [Hala Mustafa \(/experts/hala-mustafa\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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In-Depth Reports

On September 24, 2005, Hala Mustafa, Ibrahim Karawan, and Khairi Abaza addressed The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference. Dr. Mustafa is editor-in-chief of the Egyptian political quarterly al-Dimuqratiya (Democracy) and a former visiting fellow at the Institute. Dr. Karawan is director of the Middle East Center and a professor of political science at the University of Utah. Mr. Abaza, a visiting fellow at the Institute, is a former Cultural Committee secretary and Foreign Affairs Committee member for the Egyptian Wafd party. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Hala Mustafa

The democratic reform agenda adopted by the Bush administration, while controversial in both American and Arab circles, spurred a real push for change in the Middle East, including Egypt. This new U.S. policy gave priority to promoting democratic transformation rather than blindly maintaining the stability of Arab regimes by hesitating to firmly pressure them on reform. As a result, local developments that were unimaginable as recently as a year ago have now become possible.

For example, Egypt recently witnessed several historic political developments. On September 7, the country held its first multicandidate presidential election in fifty years. Other positive developments include the relative openness of the media, improvements in press freedoms, the emergence of new political parties, and the increasingly active role of civil society. Such changes have produced widespread political awareness and debate in Egyptian society, forcing the regime to take the demand for reform seriously.

Despite these developments, major challenges still confront the reform movement and democratization process in Egypt. While a new kind of political experience is emerging, old political agendas continue to cripple liberal and democratic culture. Structural problems include the systematic exclusion of liberals from participation, the political marginalization of women, the excessive role of the internal security apparatus, and the absence of alternative parties to the ruling government. Confronting such challenges requires shifting from old political norms to a more liberal, pluralistic, and secular framework that supports reform.

Ibrahim Karawan

Recent statements by Arab democrats have indicated a real desire for reform and expanded freedoms. Many have

spoken openly about the lack of democracy in Arab countries, characterizing the situation as a crisis. They have also expressed their personal respect for the rule of law, women's rights, and minority rights -- three of the fundamental components of democracy.

Some Arab governments have expressed an interest in democracy as well. Yet, their efforts to control the political agenda and deflect important issues have prevented the implementation of major political reforms. Although these regimes have not dismissed the need for further democratization outright, they have delayed the undertaking of such efforts by shifting public attention to other regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Despite these obstacles, Arab citizens -- Egyptians included -- retain a strong interest in political democratization and liberalization. Egyptians are no longer moved by the policy of selective decompression offered by the regime. Many members of the elite have seen recent Palestinian and Iraqi elections produce believable results under the shadow of occupation, and they have begun to ask why such elections cannot take place in Egypt. The question of who will succeed President Hosni Mubarak has increased Egyptian interest in democratization as well; many citizens believe that they have been tricked into accepting what appears to be hereditary rule. In light of these factors, the Egyptian people are in a state of restlessness, and the U.S. government should support their desire for change.

Khairi Abaza

Arab democrats are genuine heroes of the past century, isolated and unsupported as they were for more than fifty years. Their natural allies, the Western powers, preferred to maintain good relations with authoritarian rulers rather than support reform in Arab society. Due to this long isolation, one must be patient with Arab liberals and democrats; they will need continuous, determined support if they are to become organized and mobilized into an effective force in Arab societies.

The recent multicandidate presidential election in Egypt is a significant development, creating a real window of opportunity for reform. Egyptian political parties gained momentum by participating, and, for the first time, President Mubarak was forced to campaign on an agenda promising further constitutional amendments and political reforms.

Although this is an important step in the right direction, it can be considered historic only if followed by other substantive steps. The impact of free and fair elections should extend beyond election day; the government should create an environment that is conducive to even greater openness in future elections. The Egyptian opposition should be permitted to create political parties, have access to free media outlets, and campaign freely. And, to further facilitate the evolution of the political process, the regime must fulfill its promises of additional constitutional reform -- and soon.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Mark Nakhla.

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