



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## **Egypt Today: The State of Human Rights and Rule of Law**

Cannon House Office Building, Room 210, 10 September 2008, 2pm

The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) hosted **Marc Lynch, Ambassador Nicholas Veliotes, and Michele Dunne** to discuss the current state of democratic reform and human rights in Egypt and the U.S. foreign policy implications. Marc Lynch is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs; Ambassador Nicholas Veliotes is a former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs and former U.S. Ambassador to Egypt and Jordan; Michele Dunne is Senior Associate and Editor of the *Arab Reform Bulletin* at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The event was moderated by **Stephen McInerney**, Director of Advocacy for the Project on Middle East Democracy.

**Stephen McInerney** framed the issue by discussing Secretary Rice's pro-democracy speech in Cairo in 2005, hailed as a landmark of the Bush administration's freedom agenda. However, since 2005, the U.S. rhetoric has been revealed as empty, as the Egyptian regime has taken a series of regressive steps on issues of democracy and human rights. **McInerney said the U.S. is no longer perceived to be supporting the basic rights of Egyptians, though the desire among the Egyptian people for greater civic and political freedom has not abated.**

**Marc Lynch** discussed the disturbing state of affairs in modern Egypt. He talked about the farcical trials and convictions of leading Egyptian dissidents Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Ayman Nour; the recent parliamentary and presidential elections marred by blatant fraud and violent crackdowns against opposition; the 2007 constitutional amendments stripping the judiciary of many of its powers; and Mubarak's extension of the repressive emergency laws in 2008. **Lynch said he is not optimistic about the short-term future of Egyptian politics in the face of its increasing economic despair, labor unrest, and no legitimate outlet for political expression. Despite this, Lynch said the U.S. should not abandon its hopes for Arab democracy and must continue to forcefully advocate reform.**

**Ambassador Veliotes** conceded that when the U.S. does not live up to its promises and its principles, it leads reformers in the Middle East to believe we are complicit in maintaining the status quo. **However, Veliotes said that we cannot force other nations to change for the better, and we shouldn't try. He said it is foolish to believe that in every foreign land there is a secular, democratic republic waiting to emerge.** He noted that economic distress is at the root of Egypt's problems, exacerbated by a widening population-to-resource ratio that will not abate anytime soon. Veliotes said that the U.S. is not in a position to lecture Egyptians on how to deal with their many social and civic problems. **Veliotes said conditioning U.S. aid to human rights reform will not work in Egypt, as it would only result in a deterioration of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship, and in turn make the work of NGOs and reformers more difficult.**

He said the Egyptian-American relationship has been one of the only constants in the region for the past thirty years, and maintaining its stability should be paramount. Veliotos noted that he does not support the Egyptian regime's repressive actions, and he hopes the regime will correct its mistakes in the future.

**Michele Dunne** said that Egypt's looming succession crisis has created tension with the U.S., as all U.S. actions and statements are now seen through the prism of its opinion on the various succession scenarios. On the state of reform, Dunne said that the experience of Egyptian electoral politics this decade has been discouraging, and it is more difficult than ever to form political parties and express dissent. **She said this has resulted in reformers and activists moving away from explicit political activity and focusing on issues of economic reform and social welfare, as well as the mobilization of new media outlets such as Facebook and blogs.**

**She said the U.S. should engage Egypt on human rights by focusing on issues that are identified as important by local activists and constituencies, rather than what it alone deems important.** Dunne also said the U.S. should speak with a unified voice. Disparate views coming from Congress, the President, and the State Department only make it easier for Egypt to discount U.S. influence. Dunne also cautioned against the U.S. mixing its agenda by lumping together human rights issues with security issues. She said it allows Egypt to conclude that the U.S. is not serious about reform, and only concerned with its security interests.

In response to Ambassador Veliotos, Dunne agreed that the U.S. cannot reengineer foreign societies. **But though it can't be the impetus for change, the U.S. can and should add its support to indigenous calls for change.** She said U.S. inaction will only be used as a pretext to vilify its intentions. Dunne said the U.S. should not condition the aid that is already agreed upon, but make clear that human rights considerations will influence U.S. thinking regarding additional aid or benefits such as free trade agreements, noting the success of this approach in 2003 and 2006. She said the U.S. needs to form alliances with members of the ruling establishment and offer incentives when possible.

Marc Lynch said that without the exertion of U.S. pressure and sanctions, all that remains is empty rhetoric. He acknowledged that aid conditionality is a blunt instrument, but nonetheless can be effective and is preferable to the alternative of doing nothing. Responding to Ambassador Veliotos, Lynch said that Egyptian activists and reformers do *not* see the U.S. as imposing alien concepts like rule of law and human rights. On the contrary, **there is no debate as to the desirability of democracy, and indigenous demand for change is strong. Lynch said the U.S. does not help the efforts of reformers by enabling their continued repression.** Lynch finds room for optimism in Egypt's coming succession, as it may engender a split within the ruling elite, which can be a precondition for top-down change.

**Michele Dunne suggested the U.S. should push for the new Egyptian president to redefine the role of its internal security services and to reinstate presidential term limits.** Dunne concluded by noting that Egyptian society is in many respects better prepared for a democratic transition than any other country in the region.