



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Egypt’s Parliamentary Elections: Expectations and Challenges”

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

1300 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C.

Tuesday November 15, 2011, 9:00am-11:00am

On Tuesday, the Woodrow Wilson Center hosted an event with the Project on Middle East Democracy and the Atlantic Council entitled “Egypt’s Parliamentary Elections: Expectations and Challenges.” The discussion featured **Ibrahim Houdaiby**, a freelance columnist and researcher for the Middle East, **Michele Dunn**, the director of the Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center on the Middle East, **Magdy Samaan**, a freelance journalist and MENA Democracy Fellow at the World Affairs Institute. **Stephen McInerney**, the Executive Director for the Project on Middle East Democracy moderated the event and contributed remarks as well.

Speaking from Cairo via Skype, Houdaiby expressed several aspects of the upcoming elections on which to focus. He relayed that the elections are **significant because they are the “first step” to transfer power to the Egyptian people**, but he also enumerated a number of challenges including **security concerns, an undemocratic media, and a suspect judiciary**. There is currently a leadership vacuum, according to Houdaiby, in Egypt’s political landscape which has resulted in a fragmented population. He **stressed that the threat Islamic parties pose to democratic development is over publicized**, and that **Egyptians are seeking coherent approaches to security and economic issues** while they formulate a new identity. Houdaiby also said his optimistic **estimate for election turnout is approximately 40 percent**, which he concluded would be a vast improvement from previous elections. Additionally, he asserted that there is a noticeable lack of media objectivity which has stunted some of the election measures.

Next, **Magdy Samaan** spoke about the restraints placed on freedom of expression since the SCAF took over for Mubarak. He **asserted that freedom of expression has shrunk immensely since the revolution, directly referring to several of the activist bloggers who have been detained and arrested in recent months. Egyptian television has reverted back to Mubarak-style coverage by promoting sectarianism**, particularly during the protests at Maspero, according to Samaan. He **believes that the SCAF is “playing with Mubarak’s cards” when it comes to freedom of expression**. Samaan added that the upcoming elections represent a “dress rehearsal” for the subsequent steps toward democracy, though **he warned that the value should remain reasonable because the results will illustrate the political weight of many parties and individuals**, though they will not rule the country. Samaan also said there is an opportunity for Egypt to follow and learn from Tunisia’s positive democratic elections.

Michele Dunn addressed the topic next, **agreeing that the elections will illuminate Egypt’s political layout but will not guarantee political transition**. We “must watch the larger story,” Dunn said, noting that violence during and after the proceedings is a legitimate concern. She also **expressed that the SCAF’s actions indicate that it intends to “shape” the constitution, and she said that the role of both the parliament and the cabinet remain unclear**. Additionally, Dunn was concerned that the

developing institutions will in fact be powerless once they are formed, but **she stressed that it was far too early to “give up” on Egypt’s transition.**

Stephen McInerney added several remarks as well, stating that **the complexities of the election proceedings may cause immense confusion among the population**, particularly because some of the results will be delayed which may arouse suspicion. He also detailed many of the coalitions that have been formed in the run-up to the elections, including the Democratic Alliance, the Egyptian Bloc, and the Alliance to Continue the Revolution, among others.

During a question and answer session, Houdaiby and Samaan agreed that **the SCAF has shown a willingness to negotiate many aspects of Egypt’s transition**, though altering the military budget may prove difficult. Houdaiby also stated that most Egyptians are paying close attention to the upcoming elections, **though many feel betrayed by the SCAF and pessimism has started to cloud Egypt’s initial confidence in the proceedings.** Regarding the logistics once the votes are tallied, McInerney expressed that **there is a “lack of clarity” regarding how parliamentary seats will be portioned** to election winners, and Dunn added that this characteristic may have a negative impact on the public’s perception of balloting procedures.

Regarding the attachment of **conditionality to financial support based on the success of Egypt’s democratic transition**, Dunn stated that **it may in fact be a positive idea**, even though she objected to it in the past. However, McInerney stressed that U.S. Congress and the Obama Administration need to agree on how to institute conditionality since each entity has shown disparate strategies in the past. **Both domestic and international non-governmental organizations will also play an important role at Egypt’s polls**, the panel agreed. However, **it remains unclear the amount of access that will be granted to these actors since Egypt has not officially approved many of the requests to observe the elections.** Houdaiby added that thus far **campaigns have been focused on individuals rather than specific ideologies**, and that many parties should address the role of Islam in Egyptian democracy.