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**Libya on the Eve of Elections: Examining the Challenges of Political and Economic Development**  
**Project on Middle East Democracy**  
**Tuesday, June 12, 2012 10:00am -11:30am**  
**Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**

On Tuesday, the Project on Middle East Democracy hosted a panel discussion examining the upcoming Libyan elections as well as the political and economic hurdles that remain. The four panelists who spoke were **Manal Omar** from the U.S. Institute of Peace, **Stephen McInerney**, executive director of POMED, **Fadel Lamen** of the American-Libyan Council, and moderator **Sarah Margon** from the Center for American Progress.

Stephen McInerney, having just returned from an eight day trip to Libya, **began by saying he was more optimistic, albeit cautiously, after the visit than before** and contrasted the enthusiasm on the eve of elections in Libya with similar visits to Tunisia and Egypt. McInerney cited the general assumption that the results will be accepted as cause for the excitement, saying Libya has benefited from Tunisia and Egypt's example in that regard. Based on first hand encounters, McInerney said Libyans were still uncertain about who they will vote for, but are generally looking to the new government to address the problems that the National Transition Council (NTC) has not. McInerney said, however, that **the electoral system is one of the most complicated he has ever seen**, comprising both proportional representation lists and majoritarian seats that overlap in some districts but not in others.

McInerney went on to discuss the nascent political parties, whose inexperience and confusion he found greater than those in Egypt and Tunisia, but are still committed to playing by the rules. Without reliable public polling, however, **McInerney expressed concern that unexpected results could trigger violence in the heavily armed country**. In terms of civil society, McInerney said he was impressed by the professionalism and the success of the many young organizations he encountered. He went on to say funding for these mostly volunteer groups is still limited, **and that many are suspicious of foreign investment due to Egypt's crackdown on foreign NGO's**. McInerney questioned the future of many of these groups if their leaders are drawn into politics or their previous professions before the revolution. **He also detailed a generational divide in both civil society and political parties**, as many youth are frustrated with those who say they lack experience when the country as a whole has no experience with democracy.

Sarah Margon underscored the importance of Tunisia and Egypt's example to Libyans, who she said **have watched their elections closely and do not want to end up like Egypt**. She went on to say this fear has contributed to the high level of engagement in Libya.

Manal Omar prefaced her discussion of Libya's challenges by recalling its successes, saying **the Libyan spirit of volunteerism personally reenergized her after the cynicism of Iraq and Afghanistan**. Omar then listed her ten biggest challenges going forward. First among these was **the need for foreign assistance partnerships with Libyans to overcome suspicion and to address Libya's many serious challenges**. Also among her list

was the threat of violent saboteurs hijacking the revolution, the risk of armed groups with detainees, whom she says have sincere concerns about the legitimacy of the national justice system, destabilizing national security, and the need for a national reconciliation dialogue to “unpack” the past. Margon reiterated the importance of legitimacy for national security, and expressed concern that the government thus far has not created a plan to address it.

Fadel Lamén then discussed the high expectations among Libyans for the future, **and the need to manage those aspirations and bring them to reality**. Lamén said that Libyans now want everything they have been denied for 40 years, and that no government will be able to match these high expectations. Lamén went on to discuss **the failures of the NTC that are now carrying over to the new elected body, namely weak ties to local governments and poor separation of powers**. Lamén then discussed the major players in the upcoming election. According to Lamén, **the much-hyped Muslim Brotherhood is strong, but not as strong as many think** due to infighting and concern for Islamist domination by secularists. Then he named the National Democratic Coalition, comprised of multiple parties, civil society groups, and individuals, who present themselves as democrats without an Islamic agenda. Lastly, he discussed the Islamist jihadists who may not be interested in participating in the election, but still want to be engaged in the political scene.

In a question about the perception of foreign oil companies in Libya, Lamén said their image was mixed, but that Libyans are eager to use oil revenues to develop the state. Manal added that many want civil society groups to monitor revenues and prevent corruption.

Then, in a question about national reconciliation, Manal said **that it is easy to skip important steps, especially given the short timeline of transition in Libya, but that strong concerns remain that must be addressed about the integration of Gaddafi-era loyalists into the new state**. She went on to say that the state needs a system of transitional justice that all recognize in order to tackle this. Margon added that she was struck by the debate around the citizen status of Sub-Saharan migrants in Libya, whom many Libyans resent for the role some played in countering the revolution but are still living in Libya.

Addressing a question about federalism, McInerney discussed regional resentment, specifically in Benghazi towards Tripoli which received most of the development money during Gaddafi’s reign. Lamén then discussed **Muslim identity in Libya, which he said goes unquestioned. He added, however, that there is less interest in political Islam and that most people are nationalists**. Lamén then addressed a question about the impact of the diaspora, which he called critical to injecting democratic traditions into Libya. Manal warned however that nationals may come to resent the returning international Libyans if they displace nationals in government.

When asked about what the international community can do, McInerney recalled that many Libyans perceived the U.S. as too focused on Egypt. Lamén added that **Libyans don’t want to be used as contractors and underscored the need for partnerships**. Margon echoed Lamén’s sentiment, adding that **the U.S. need not spend a lot to see a big impact if they contribute much needed technical expertise**.