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"Will the Monarchs Reform? Challenges to Democracy in the Gulf"
Project on Middle East Democracy
Wednesday, September 26, 2012, 12:00pm-2:00pm
SEIU Headquarters, 1800 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 200036

On Wednesday, POMED hosted a panel discussion titled "Will the Monarchs Reform? Challenges to Democracy in the Gulf." The panel included **Maryam al-Khawaja**, Acting President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and Deputy Director of the Gulf Center for Human Rights, **Les Campbell**, Senior Associate and Regional Director for Middle East and North Africa Programs at the National Democratic Institute, **Kristin Diwan**, Assistant Professor of Middle East Politics at American University, and **Stephen McInerney**, Executive Director of the Project on Middle East Democracy, who moderated.

Moderator **Stephen McInerney** opened the panel, noting that there has been little discussion of the internal strife occurring in the Gulf states, with the exception of Bahrain.

Maryam al-Khawaja began by claiming that the international community has forgotten the populations within the Gulf states, focusing instead solely on the Monarchies. She discussed the use of the judicial system within Gulf states to crack down on human rights activists by using vague anti-terrorism laws and secret trials, highlighting cases from the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Al-Khawaja closed by citing American willingness to support oppressive governments in the Gulf, which al-Khawaja said destroys American credibility as a defender of human rights.

Les Campbell opened by saying that the Gulf countries "appear to believe they can skate through the changes happening in the region," which he believes is untrue. Campbell discussed reasons why more people have not revolted, including a 60 percent salary increase for private sector jobs and a 120 percent salary increase for security/military jobs in Qatar, along with 100 percent raises in the United Arab Emirates and revived discussion about extending voting rights to women in Saudi Arabia. Campbell discussed the National Democratic Institute's own run-in with authorities in the Emirates, where NDI employees were given 24 hours to leave the country after NDI was considered to be encouraging the uprising. "If we, as an international organization, are being treated like that, I always thought how much worse it must be for the locals," Campbell said. He closed with reactions around the Gulf, including a recent court ruling in Kuwait that appears to favor the opposition and the mobilizing of the women's movement in Saudi Arabia.

Kristin Diwan discussed the broader trends in the region, noting that there has been a "tremendous uptick in political activism." Diwan said that many in the Gulf have a negative attitude towards protesting and opposition, sentiment that the Governments are trying to foster, especially via social media. In response to activism, governments have been withholding financial support from protestors, barring them from university, dismissing

them from jobs, and in extreme cases, revoking citizenship. Another strategy, which both the activists and governments have been using, is that of regional cooperation. While activists have been working across borders to help one another, governments have banned the travel of activists into their respective countries and arrested people for insulting the leaders of other countries. Additionally, the wealthier countries have used the threat of pulling monetary aid to influence the foreign and domestic policy of neighboring countries. The final trend is that of using a relationship with Iran as justification for cracking down on the opposition. Most Gulf States have Sunni governments and are using links between activists and Iran to discredit the protests.

During the Q&A, Campbell cited a poll by Concrete Polling in Qatar that found participants were less enthusiastic about democratic change after the Arab Spring due to instability. Diwan emphasized that while people pushed for change, they had no plan for what will come next. The panelists were then asked how the middle class was responding, how migrant workers have been affected, why the international community's response was lacking, and what role Iran has to play. Al-Khawaja, addressing questions about migrant workers and the upper class, said "If you want to understand the situation in a country, look at where the human rights defenders are." She said that the governments have cracked down on people from all social classes and that migrant workers have been forced to participate in pro-government protests. In response to a question about Iranian involvement, the panelists agreed that Iran is used as a "boogeyman" by governments to justify the crackdowns. Campbell responded to a question about the democratic process by saying that people simply want "some control over the decisions that affect their lives." He said discontinuity in the ruling families could lead to democratic change. Diwan, answering the same question, said that change can come from the ground up through pressure or through succession, since there exist enormous divisions within the ruling families. She emphasized, however, that the public must overcome divisions and work together. Answering a question about women's rights, Diwan pointed out that for the religious opposition, women's rights may actually be a dividing issue. Al-Khawaja stressed the importance of "a government that respects human rights," not just women's rights. She closed the discussion by criticizing Obama for his relationship with governments who are against free speech, even though he emphasized its importance in his address to the United Nations.