"The Arab Silent Majority: Challenging Assumptions about Regional Transitions"
Thursday, June 27, 2013, 2:00-3:30pm
1777 F Street NW

On Thursday, June 27, the Project on Middle East Democracy held an event titled: "The Arab Silent Majority: Challenging Assumptions about Regional Transitions." The panel was moderated by **Stephen McInerney**, the executive director of the Project on Middle East Democracy, and featured panelists **Ellen Lust**, associate professor of political science at Yale University, and **Jakob Wichmann**, a founding partner of JMW Consulting. The panelists discussed the initial results of their joint study on the political perceptions of Egyptians, Libyans, and Tunisians.

In his opening remarks, **Jakob Wichmann** outlined the methodology of the three surveys conducted in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. He mentioned that in Egypt there were nearly 4,000 respondents to the survey, in Tunisia there were approximately 1,100 and just fewer than 1,000 in Libya. He also outlined the main themes for the discussion. The discussion covered three main topics: (1) perceptions of democracy among voters, (2) the success of the Islamist vote and how voters viewed the role of religion in the state, and (3) the similarities and differences in survey results in the three counties covered. **Ellen Lust** began the conversation on competing perceptions of democracy in the three countries. She started her remarks by saying the between 80-90 percent of Arabs view democracy as a positive thing and support democratic reform despite its deficiencies. She then pointed out that "democracy means different things to different peoples." She explained her statement by showing survey results that revealed that in Egypt the rural and the poor associated democracy with economic issues rather than strictly political ones. For instance, those from impoverished or rural backgrounds overwhelming associated democracy with greater equality and the government providing basic services to the population. However, those from more affluent or urban backgrounds were more likely to associate democracy with political rights such as being able change the government through elections or freedom to criticize your government. She went on to say that understanding what democracy means to people is very important for understanding political behavior and that the "rural poor need to be recognized." She also discussed various breakdowns of voter participation based on age, gender, education, and whether voters lived in rural or urban settings. The results of the survey revealed little differentiation in political preferences based on age and gender lines, but urban and educated voters were significantly more likely to vote than their counterparts.

The conversation moved back to Wichmann, who began the second theme of the discussion. He explained the different means through which he and Lust defined their participants' religiosity. The first was through self-identifying. This way, they could see how those who chose their religious identity above other identities (national, tribal, occupational) acted politically. The second means of defining religiosity was behavior. This way, they could see if those who went to mosque more frequently or participated in the five daily prayers regularly were more or less likely to vote in a certain manner. The final means of defining religiosity was through questions related to what the nature state and its relationship to religion. Wichmann discussed how the results of the survey differed in Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt, the survey revealed strong correlations with political values and voting for Islamist parties whereas in Tunisia there was no correlation between political values and voting practices. In

Tunisia, there was a strong correlation between religious behavior and voting for Islamist parties. In Libya there were no correlations that predicted voting for an Islamist party.

Wichmann continued his remarks discussing the surprising performance of Egypt's strongest Salafi party al-Nour in parliamentary elections. He attributed al-Nour's success to their strong showing rural areas. He pointed out that the secular parties mostly ignored rural areas turning them into a two-party contest between al-Nour and the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Nour was able to capitalize on traditional cleavages between Mubarak's NDP and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Salafis used the old regime's voting networks to increase their share of the vote. Jakob also mentioned that al-Nour enjoyed better access to resources than did other secular parties. Speaking on the success of Islamist parties he said, "We do not see in the numbers that Islamists will dominate for eternity." He finally discussed how all three countries have large moderate sectors of the population but that the secularists were unable to organize and capitalize on this sector.

In her closing remarks, **Ellen Lust** discussed the two different types of conflicts in the region and how they relate to identity. The first type of conflict she defined as "universal conflicts," where the parties involved see "identity as malleable" and therefore subject to change. This conflict is a fight for people's allegiances and support rather than over land or resources. This kind of conflict often leads to support for illiberal policies or authoritarianism. The second type of conflict is "particularistic conflicts," which is defined by zero-sum conflicts, such as when when people fight over resources or land. People see identity as static in particularistic conflicts and therefore do not fear losing members of their cause to other groups. These conflicts often lead to threats of secession or group conflict. Ellen then discussed how both Egypt and Tunisia in their current state are more prone to universal conflicts due the polarization of the populations and the undercurrents of Islamist versus secularist. Libya on the other hand is more prone to particularistic struggle due to the strong tribal tradition and the religious homogeneity. Following Ellen's remarks the panel was opened up to questions from the audience. Responding to a question on voter turnout Ellen discussed how the transitional phase differently affects different voters. Traditionally some Egyptians voted for a local known candidate in order to curry favor and to seek some form of patronage. After the fall of Mubarak and the emergence of free elections, some of these local politicians became marginalized and thus severed their traditional ties with their constituencies. This may have led some Egyptians, particularly in rural areas, to refrain from voting in elections.