Elections and the Democratic Transformations in the Arab World: Step Forward or a Step Back
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Reviewed by
Jamal M. Abdel Hai
Al-Quds University, East Jerusalem

The democratization process in the Arab world is much more advanced at the procedural level than it is at the substantive level. Furthermore, this procedural democratization is a regime's response to political and economic crises. Then, since the democratization process has mainly been top-down, it is essentially a defensive and truncated reaction, neither linear nor irreversible. *Elections and the Democratic Transformations in the Arab World: Step Forward or a Step Back* focuses on the political transition process, reform, and democratization of the Arab world.

The primary objectives of this book are 1) to demonstrate that parliamentary institutions provide a useful perspective from which one can better understand the dynamics of democratic transition and consolidation in the Arab world, 2) to highlight the many contributions that legislatures can make to the process of democratization, and 3) to provide information about legislative systems. This book also seeks to answer core questions of the analytical framework that have structured the contributors' various analyses: How has democracy been portrayed and understood? Why have liberalization and democratization come about in each of the countries studied? How should this process unfold?

The emphasis here is on doctrine and practice. The evaluation of how real and credible these doctrinal positions are requires that the practices be thoroughly examined. This may reveal a potential gap between doctrine and behavior—that is, between *saying* and *doing*. Thus, the emphasis is also on the explanatory factors shaping the presence or absence, as well as the current state, of the processes of political liberalization and democratization. The co-authors examine the structural and contextual conditions that might serve as preconditions, facilitators, or obstacles to liberalization or democratization. They focus on such issues as parliamentary and municipal elections in several Arab states, as well as on human rights. In so doing, the contributors highlight that elections, parties, and legislative institutions are the formal characteristics of a democratic polity. The obstacles are the issues of free debate, toleration of differences, and acceptance of transparency and accountability.

The contributors have repeatedly emphasized the difference between liberalization, or the expansion of public space and political liberties, and democratization, or the expansion of political participation and political accountability. The result has been the emergence of pluralism—albeit in constrained form—or of a multiparty system without democracy. The most important characteristic of such reform is that it is not intended to substantially devolve power or weaken the control of existing authoritarian elites. The book analyzes the elections that have been held, as well as the mechanisms of these elections and their impact on political and social life in particular Arab countries. It explores the

context of the elections and their impact on the processes of political reform and democratization. It then moves on to discuss the legislation and constitution of the elections, debating the constitutional values of democracy in the Arab world. Therefore, the contributors investigate the degree of fairness and transparency in elections, as well as the extent of representation in parliaments or councils these elections achieve for the various segments and categories of people.

Moreover, the book focuses on the size of the political and social forces and their influence in the Arab communities. It examines the role of specific political groups, concentrating on political Islam by investigating the impact of the Islamic movements' participation in—or their boycott of—the political systems, as well as the impact this participation or non-participation has on the Islamic movements themselves. The objective here is to question whether these Islamic movements have benefited from their engagement in the political process, or if they have paid a price for this engagement due to the process's level of popularity. Ghanim Jawad, the manager of the Khoi'i Organization, a culture and human rights organization in London, contributes by analyzing the concept of elections in the Shiite community within the framework of political Islam in the Arab region. Mohammed Abu Roman, an expert in Islamic movements, provides research on the other features of political Islam.

The book offers several analytical views of a number of Arab and foreign contributors and stakeholders in the question of reform and democratization in 10 Arab countries and three foreign countries: Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Morocco, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Kuwait, as well as the Netherlands, Germany, and the UK. Furthermore, the book examines the effects of 2005–2007 municipal and parliamentary elections in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Morocco, Palestine, and Jordan.

The book also examines the elections from the perspective of women, in terms of the development of women's political participation in Arab societies through parliament, the organization of local government, and municipal management. A special chapter is devoted to the political participation of women in the Arab world. Falak al-Jama'ani, a member of the Jordanian council, presents her personal experience, while Dr. Idris al Krini of Moroccan Marrakech University provides insight into the benefits of a proportionate system for empowering the woman representative in parliament.

The book's contributors confirm that much of the region has experienced significant liberalization during the last two decades, as well as many smaller degrees of democratic reform. The result is a state in which degrees of political pluralism do exist, but meaningful political participation and accountability are generally absent from the political process. The contributors suggest that the growth of multiple centers of autonomous social institutions can counterweigh the power of the state, sustaining greater pluralism and providing an organizational foundation for the articulation of various group interests. Autonomous social organization also provides a possible framework for resisting authoritarian state power, or perhaps, for forcing the state elites to accommodate influential social groups.

They also recommend the minimum criteria to validate the election process in the Arab world:

- Emphasize the importance of the expansion of the electoral process in the Arab world and the necessity for it to continue, regardless of the deficiencies and violations that have mired it thus far.

- Stress the necessity for creating a secure political and social environment that allows for freedom of expression, freedom of opinions, freedom of organization, and freedom of gathering.

- Foster an environment based on political pluralism and intellectualism.

- Create an environment that allows diversity and protects individual and group rights.

- Ensure an environment that guarantees civil, political, economic, social, and cultural human rights.

Further, the contributors suggest that legislatures can effectively contribute to the political reform process in significant ways by undertaking the following specific actions:

- Improve society's ability to express political demands, as well as to follow and influence debates on public policy issues.

- Enhance the political system's capacity to process and satisfy societal demands.

- Provide channels through which the actions of the executive branch can be subjected to oversight.

- Contribute to the regulation and management of political conflict.

Therefore, the conclusion of the contributors is that Arab parliaments can make a critical contribution to the strengthening of the institutional capacity of political parties and, in so doing, improve society's ability to articulate and aggregate political demands. Consequently, through participation in a legislature, parties can develop their capabilities. They can mobilize the expertise and information that will enable them to submit detailed programs and concrete policy proposals that will enhance both their credibility and their ability to affect public policy debates. Arab parliaments are also expected to offer avenues and mechanisms through which conflicts can be resolved peacefully. When they achieve this, they can serve as an example to the wider society.

The political legislations and measures should ensure that the following circumstances are in place in Arab countries:

- Freedom of the press and the autonomy of the information must be guaranteed as an embodiment of the peoples' right to knowledge.

- The people's right to participate in public affairs must be guarded.

- The supremacy of law must be enacted through enforcement of the judiciary system.

- Equal opportunities must be available for all citizens, and the concept of citizenship must be affirmed as the central basis of an individual's rights and duties.

- There must not be any discrimination allowed among citizens on the basis of race, religion, sex, or beliefs.

The contributors emphasize the necessity of ending the "iron fist" rule of the security devices, allowing civil society to function, and enforcing the role of political parties. They affirm the need for complete legislative reform, laws, and availability of information, which can organize the political process and create a legal political environment, enabling elections to achieve goals that allow for the peaceful circulation of authority.