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Preliminary Findings and Recommendations from “Arab Oppositions Project.”

Cases: Egypt, Yemen, Jordan and Morocco

***Findings: Institutional-Political Dynamics***

1. Civil society organizations, NGOs and the like play a central but often misunderstood role in the liberalized autocracies of the Arab world. Their role is not so much to advance democratic reform, a task for which they lack the institutional clout and influence. Rather, their central role is to articulate the interests of a diverse range of social, cultural and political elites and the competing groups and constituencies they formally or informally represent. This could be summed up as a *semi-corporatist relationship*, one enhanced by the implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) corporatist relationship between the state and NGOs, civil society groups and the like.
2. Civil society organizations sometimes play a central part in articulating the interests of non-Islamist groups, particularly those espousing liberal or secular goals that could not be easily or safely advanced in competitive political systems. As a result, the secular leaders of these organizations are hesitant to push for dramatic political reform, preferring instead to rely on regimes to provide protection from Islamists. Indeed, many leaders from these “civil society” groups maintain privileged relations with the state, and often cycle in and out of state organizations and state positions.
3. Civil society groups that do not readily conform to the rules of the neo-corporatist game are sometimes “punished” by finding their access to state funds (including advertising funds—as in the case of Morocco) cut off or reduced. The state’s patronage of semi-official NGOs—whose boards are often controlled by actors who are part of or close to regimes—offers another way of “disciplining” non-cooperative NGOs. Alternatively, the latter are subject to an array of laws and regulations that the state uses to arbitrarily punish its opponents and reward its friends/clients. This rule *by* (as opposed to *of*) law is a major obstacle in the way of creating more effective, pro-democratic NGOs.
4. Because NGOs spend most of their energies and time lobbying the state, and because NGOs divert institutional and human energies away from building effective political parties and a genuine *political society*, “pluralism” in this neo-corporatist game can enhance liberalization *at the expense of democratization*.
5. Regime type has some effect on this complex dynamic. The more pluralistic monarchies—Morocco in particular—provide the greatest institutional, legal and economic space for semi-independent action directed at lobbying the regime. In pluralistic monarchies there is less incentive for organizations to cooperate since civil society organizations attain most of their objectives by lobbying the palace. By contrast, presidential systems provide

less space for semi-independent action, and thus some incentive for cooperation between groups and organizations. Yemen provides an excellent example of this dynamic.

### ***Findings: Alliance Building***

1. The neo-corporatist system greatly inhibits political alliances that bridge the Islamist/non-Islamist divide. By providing selective rewards to Islamists and secularists, liberalized autocracies discourage collective action. Secular groups are especially tempted by such rewards, and thus are likely to defect back to the state, particularly when out-numbered or out-organized by their Islamist rivals.
2. The readiness of secular groups to sustain alliances with Islamists or defect is also a function of the balance of power between non-Islamists and their Islamist rivals/potential allies. Where, as in the case of Yemen, there is a rough balance of influence/power between the two, alliances are more likely. Where the balance favors Islamists--as in the cases of Jordan, Egypt and Morocco--alliances are harder to build or sustain, and liberal/secular actors are much more tempted to take rewards for **defection** provided by the state.
3. **Regime type** seems has some effect on this dynamic. Paradoxically, the most "liberalized" of regimes--especially those ruled by monarchs who are able to play some arbitrating role in the political system-- provide an incentive for NGOs to talk to the state rather than to talk to one another. By contrast, in less pluralistic systems ruled--especially presidential systems ruled by presidents who are tied to would-be hegemonic ruling parties--there is more incentive for groups to cooperate. Yemen displays this pattern quite clearly, and Egypt up to a point.
4. The divide between even the most "moderate" Islamist and secular groups is in some sense *existential*: they advance competing and sometimes mutually opposed definitions of national identity. Even in the case of Yemen, which boasts the region's only durable Islamist-secular alliance, sustaining this alliance depends on avoiding discussion or agreement over basic issues such as the role of Shariah.
5. There is in all four countries analyzed in this study a new generation of young, or relatively young, activists who are cut out of the neo-corporatist system, and/or who play an un-influential role in it. These actors articulate grievances and interests via the internet, and/or by creating new organizations that do not challenge the role played by more veteran activists. States DO NOT provide institutional, legal and economic space for these new actors. Indeed, the opposite is true: the "upgrading of autocracy" is designed to prevent such groups for organizing or establishing cross-ideological alliances. Veteran opposition activists are sometimes complicit in this dynamic, as they want to retain their representational monopolies. This is especially true in the Islamist camp.

### **Strategic and Programmatic Implications: Reform or Political Structural Adjustment?**

### ***Grand Strategic Issues/Recommendations***

1. While the system of interest articulation in liberalized autocracies often sustains liberalization at the expense of democratization, it is not obvious that the prospects for long term, stable political reforms would be enhanced by an effort to re-engineer these semi-corporatist systems in ways that would dramatically redefine the role of NGOs. Given the vulnerability of secular groups, it is possible that dramatic change might push non-Islamist activists to be more, rather than less, supportive of the status quo. In some Arab states the destabilizing costs of major change might outweigh the potential benefits. Thus the costs and benefits of pushing for incremental reforms versus dramatic change or "*political structural adjustment*" must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
2. That said, *in wider strategic terms*, it must be clearly understood that for major structural political reform to take place, the US must move away from a *demand-side* approach and emphasize instead, a *supply side* approach by which ruling regimes are encouraged, prodded or rewarded to undertake significant institutional, economic and legal re-engineering. It is not clear that the USG has the political will or the level of institutional coherence and unanimity within the highest reaches of the government—and/or between Washington-based and foreign-based USG actors-- to design and apply the carrots and sticks needed for encouraging political structural adjustment.
3. Regional conflicts have a clear, if complex affect on efforts to build, moderate, effective political oppositions. The persistence and periodic violent intensification of the Palestinian-Israeli and wider Israeli-Arab conflict has diverted institutional and human resources towards alliances of shared resentment over foreign policy issues. On some occasions these alliances have transmuted into movements that focus on domestic issues, as was the case with Egypt's *Kifaya Movement*. But particularly in those Arab countries that have been a direct or indirect party to disputes with Israel, there can be little hope for effective, sustained institutional alliances absent a credible resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. If the USG does not have the will and capacity to push for such a solution, such inaction will help sustain advocates of the status quo in both regimes and oppositions.
4. In addition to US political will and institutional coherence, political adjustment requires careful strategic thinking about the kinds of institutional, economic and legal changes that are most likely to promote *a more competitive political arena*. Absent such an arena, non-Islamist NGO activists will have little incentive to build strong alliances and will continue to defect to the state. But, as noted above, unless ruling elites or regimes have the will and capacity to promote changes that yield a multi-polar (instead of bio-polar) playing field, there can be no hope of exiting the prevailing pattern of zero-sum, regime-Islamist conflict—a pattern that allows for a measure of political liberalization but *which cannot easily give way to substantive democratization*.

### ***Strategic Programming: Issues/Recommendation***

1. The quest to promote a more competitive playing field must focus on enhancing the institutional leverage of *non-Islamist groups*. This does not mean that the US should pull back from programs that engage Islamists. But an engagement strategy will backfire if it further isolates or weakens non-Islamists. A *double track* must be pursued, so that

democracy promoters retain and demonstrate the principle of working with *all* non-violent, moderate opposition groups, while finding pragmatic ways of enhancing the collective leverage of political leaders whose voices have been drowned out by the dominant role played by veteran political leaders in regimes and oppositions. While in practical terms, enhancing the leverage of these under-represented elites sometimes means focusing more attention on *non-Islamist actors*, new Islamist voices can and indeed should be part of this effort to promote a third voice or alternative.

2. The effort to enlarge and strengthen a "**third alternative**" or "**third voice**" cannot rely *exclusively* or even largely on the familiar array of groups and actors that have long competed for programmatic and financial support from American and European democracy promoters. Veteran activists who articulate women's, liberal or ethnic (Berber) interests often lack legitimacy or leverage in the wider society. In many cases, such well entrenched actors want to maintain existing associational cartels, or keep new elites out of those cartels. The strategic focus of US democracy promotion programs should be on identifying new or under-utilized institutional arenas through which a new generation of elites or potential leaders can regularly interact with—and eventually mobilize-- a *substantial social base* that remains alienated from political life. Public universities, new social movements mobilizing through the street or through informal cyber-space, are just some of the arenas that might be considered in an effort to awaken, organize and ultimately mobilize elements of a weak or missing *political society*.
3. New strategies must be forged to promote effective and sustainable organizational links between civil society groups and *political society*. The latter is weak and absent in Arab liberalized autocracies. In concrete terms, this means supporting civil society groups whose programs *are specifically designed to enhance the political leverage and authority of political parties, parliaments* and elections. Reform alliances are the most obvious candidates for this role, but given their frequently transitory or tactical nature it is vital that more permanent, specialized **civo-political** society organizations emerge.
4. Organizations such as Freedom House, Human Rights Watch and the like should be encouraged –and where appropriate given financial support—to undertake a **comprehensive and systematic inventory** of the formal and informal, legal, economic, technological and institutional tools that Arab governments have or are amassing in their efforts to constrain or limit the emergence of a politically effective Third Voice. The increasing use of new cyber and communication technologies by autocratic regimes requires special attention. If, as this study suggests, the familiar Islamist-regime stand-off that prevails in liberalized autocracies is not preordained--but rather is a consequence of regime policies-- it is vital that the array of tools used to sustain this "Us of Them" situation be exposed and discredited so that genuine reformers can make the case for a viable, safe and genuinely competitive process of political change.

### ***Programmatic Recommendations***

- A. It is essential that new institutional mechanisms be created to assure that USG democracy promoters overseas and in Washington share a **common strategic vision** of the means and

purposes of democracy promotion. More frequent rotation of USG officials working in the field would in some specific cases greatly assist in promoting more programmatic and strategic coherence.

- B.** US and European democracy promoters in the field should undertake a wide-ranging initiative to identify and engage emerging young leaders who could play a role in creating new civo-political organizations, or in enhancing the capacity of existing NGOs to play key role in promoting civil society. In many cases, such initiatives will build on previous or existing programs, but in ways that are *strategically geared* to promoting more effective civo-political action.
- C.** While there are ample indications that such new or emerging leaders are keen to organize, they face substantial domestic obstacles. Institutional arenas *out of country* should be created that will provide a safe space for bringing such leaders together and promoting constructive dialogues between them. USG organizations and officials should support such efforts but *not* lead them. *American and European NGOS and universities should take the lead.*
- D.** USAID and other similar evaluations of existing or recent democracy programs should be comprehensively reviewed to identify which programs promote *civo-political action* as opposed to more narrowly based, "technical programs." The latter, which include a variety of intensive training programs for parliamentary or NGO leaders, teach some important skills. But their utility will remain limited so long as they are not clearly and systematically linked to enhancing the leverage and authority of political parties, parliaments and elections.
- E.** Organizations such as the American or International Bar Association, working on concert with credible domestic Arab organizations such as Lawyers Guilds or Human Rights Associations, should be enlisted to provide specific recommendations on amending existing associational and constitutional laws that hamper effective political organization and mobilization. These recommendations should be communicated to Arab governments, NGOs and other interested parties.