

## ELECTIONS MATTER

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The debate over democracy, its definition, its (pre) requisites<sup>1</sup>, as well as its impact on the behavior of governments in domestic and foreign policies is here to stay for years to come. Is democracy the best form of political system for promoting political and civil, as well as economic, rights? Can democracies continue keeping the average citizen passionate about politics, a matter of vital interest to polyarchies? Are democracies really more peaceful than non-democracies?<sup>2</sup> Above all, is democracy an appropriate or desirable form of political system for non-Western societies (e.g., Middle Eastern countries)? That is, can an essentially Western ideology be applied to non-Western societies? To answer these questions, proponents of democracy have looked into socioeconomic, political, cultural, historical, as well as external factors that in one way or the other help shape and mould forces responsible for political system type prevalent in different countries.<sup>3</sup>

Although we cannot, because of space and time, grapple with these important issues here, the proposition that there are requisites to democracy, as some have claimed, needs attention.

Much has also been written on politics in the Middle East and the causes of persistence of authoritarianism in the region. Orientalists and neo-Orientalists have offered explanations, focusing on Islam, tribalism, and dominant states. More recently, the absence of a vibrant civil society is cited as the determining factor in explaining the persistence of domineering states and the absence of democracy in the region.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, two recent elections in Iran and Israel (although Israel is considered a democracy by most observers) have highlighted the significance of popular elections in reevaluation of national and international policies in these two countries. But for democracy to become a norm in the conduct of politics in the Middle East, much more is needed. Middle Eastern countries either lack requisites to democracy (e.g., an adequate social and economic development and a vibrant civil society) or are dominated by a strong and domineering state, or both. Only Israel and Turkey have shown signs of democracy, and even these two have

found their democracy constantly being challenged. Elections, however, have been held in recent times in Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, post-war Lebanon, Pakistan, and in the post-Revolution Iran. Although the competitiveness of these elections is open to question, because of, among things, electoral restrictions and regulation, the impact of elections on the state behavior has been felt, especially in Iran and in Israel.

Regardless of one's position with respect to the desirability, the quality and characteristics, or even the applicability of political democracy in the Middle East, it remains a political system desired by many, if not most, around the globe. Citizens in Western countries remain fundamentally free from arbitrary and random state repression. They enjoy rights not shared by people under authoritarian regimes, where political systems have deprived their citizens from fundamental human rights. These political and civil rights, however, should be understood not as Western or Eastern, but as universal rights that entitle the individual to have a voice in shaping his or her future, and to be free from harm and torture by an abusive government. The contention is that "nobody likes to be imprisoned, tortured, or killed, and that everybody tries to escape when confronted with harm."<sup>5</sup>

The proposition that the inauguration of democracy is contingent upon certain preconditions implies that prospects for establishing and maintaining democracy without these (pre) requisites in place are not good. It follows that holding competitive and meaningful elections (e.g., free, fair, and frequent elections) where these prerequisites are not in place is a futile endeavor, because sooner or later a democratic breakdown occur in most cases.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, where the level of economic development is low, poverty is widespread, adult literacy rate is low and the state is all powerful, elections will end up serving none but the political elite, who use the occasion to legitimize their authoritarian control. However, as India's and Bangladesh's experience with democracy point out, elections can facilitate popular participation in the political process where socioeconomic requisites to democracy have lagged behind. Elections held in the post Marcos Philippines, Chile in the 1980s, Mexico in the 1990s, post-Apartheid South Africa, and the 1997 presidential election in Iran are a few other examples. Elections provide, of course, no guarantees of the translation of popular demand into actual state policy. Nor do they necessarily reflect the majority interests, while protecting the minority from discrimination and injustice. Furthermore, some elections are more of a show, staged by the state to portray popular support and legitimacy, as is repeatedly evidenced in some developing countries. In short, elections are not necessarily indicators of a functioning political democracy. On the other hand, political democracy cannot function without elections. Regardless of whether requisites to democracy are present, elections can help prepare for a democratic society. Perhaps India illustrates this point best, where competitive elections have given ordinary people a voice in the past fifty years in challenging the state, with varying degrees of success, to deal with social and economic issues of concern to the average citizen.

Despite their shortcomings, elections are the best indicators of democratic activity within countries. Some developing countries, including those in the Middle East, have come to experiment with democracy by holding local and national elections in the Third Wave of democratization.<sup>7</sup> Although inaugurating substantive democracy requires a lot more than

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just holding elections, turn-around in the composition of state personnel and bureaucracy, because of elections, can have a long-term positive impact on behavior of the state. This is in addition to the impact elections have on the psyche of the electorate, giving rise to individual confidence that his or her votes count. Elections also raise individuals' expectations for having a permanent voice in the political process. So, elections

1) provide for popular expression of support for, or defiance to, the state for otherwise defenseless masses;

(2) help bring accountability into the political process;

(3) provide the state a warning mechanism to respond to popular worries and anxieties, as well as hopes and wishes;

(4) have a psychological impact on people's perceptions of the role of government in society and the place of the individual within it, increasing individual self-confidence;

(5) help raise social consciousness of people about social problems.

The Presidential election in June 1997 was perhaps, because of the gulf between the two leading candidates, Muhammad Khatami and the Majles Speaker, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, the most important post-Revolution election in Iran. While the roots of political power of both men are engrained in their "Islamic" view of politics, the two differ on ways and means necessary to fulfill the goals of socioeconomic and political development and the realization of an "Islamic" society. What is Islamic and what the role of an Islamic government should be remain hotly debated issues, both in Iran and elsewhere in the Islamic World and need not detain us here.<sup>8</sup> But, the arrival of Khatami has prompted optimism in Iran about a less domineering government and a more open society, as well as a less radical and more conciliatory Iran in the international community. Elsewhere, the June 1996 election in Israel had resulted in a victory for Benjamin Netanyahu of the Likud Party, a major event in recent Israeli politics that has polarized Israeli society over the question of peace and conflict with the PLO and the Arab states. Netanyahu's hard line position on important issues like the future of Jerusalem, Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and the future of the Golan Heights has departed from the late Yitzhak Rabin's of the Labor government. Rabin's administration was seemingly more compromising in its negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Arab States, Syria and Lebanon in particular.

The election of Benjamin Netanyahu seems to have complicated the peace process, with the Israeli electorate divided into roughly half pro and half against Mr. Netanyahu's hard-line approach in giving previously agreed-upon concessions to the Palestinian Authority. In Iran, President Khatami has slowly come to challenge the hard-line conservatives in and out of Majles. While it is too early to predict the future of Khatami's drive for a more moderate government, his election has helped highlight the polarization of politics in Iran, generating more debates and discussions both in the government circles and among religious and secular intellectuals. No doubt that the electorates in Iran and Israel have raised their voices, for better or worse, in determining national policies. This is something to be excited about, especially in the case of Iran.

**Notes**

1. Whether there are prerequisites or requisites to democracy has been debated in the literature on democracy, but need not contain us here. See Seymour M. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review*, 1959: 69-105.
2. On this topic see, for example, William J. Dixon, "Democracy and the Management of Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 37, 1(March 1993): 42-68.
3. The literature on democracy and its prerequisites is rich and there is no need to list pertinent works here. However, for a brief discussion of qualitative and quantitative approaches to democracy and its requisites, see Rueschemeyer, Dietrich, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See, also, Ali Abootalebi, "Democratization in Developing Countries: 1980-1989," *Journal of Developing Areas*, 29 (July 1995): 507-30.
4. For a more recent discussion on Civil Society and Democracy, see Gurdun Kramer, "Islamist Notions of Democracy," *Middle East Report* (July-August 1993): 2-8; Augustus Richard Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995); Emmanuel Sivan, "Constraints & Opportunities in the Arab World," *Journal of Democracy*, 8, 2 (April 1997): 103-13.
5. Giovanni Sartori, "How Far Can Free Government Travel?" *Journal of Democracy*, 6, no. 3 (July 1995): 101-11, p. 103.
6. Democratic breakdown in developing countries are caused by a number of sources, including foreign intervention, dependency, and military intervention in politics. See, for example, Edward Ned Muller, "Dependent Economic Development, Aid Dependence on the United States, and Democratic Breakdown in the Third World," *International Studies Quarterly*, 29, 1985: 445-69.
7. For a discussion of the Third Wave, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Samuel P. Huntington, "The Future of the Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy*, 4, 8 (October 1997): 3-12.
8. Political Islam, Islamic movements, civil society and democracy have been subjects of debate for years. See, for example, John L. Esposito, ed., *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997); Augustus Richard Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995).