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Insights and Analysis

[Kuwait: Interview with Ali al-Rashed, National Assembly member and candidate](#)

[Egypt: Second Generation Internet Users and Political Change](#)
Ahmad Zaki Osman

[Jordan/Egypt: Why Don't the Benefits of Growth Trickle Down?](#)
Ibrahim Saif and Ava Leone

[Syria: Will the Anti-Trust Law Make a Difference?](#)
Joshua Landis

[Gulf States: Competing in Educational Reform](#)
Amal Sakr

Readers React

Find out how readers are reacting to articles in the *Arab Reform Bulletin*. Join the debate by sending your views to the editor at arb@CarnegieEndowment.org.

News and Views

[Egypt: Salary and Price Increases; Local Elections; Brothers Sentenced](#)
[Kuwait: Elections; Tribal Demonstration; Anti-demonstration Law Revoked](#)
[Bahrain: New Press Bill; Minister Questioned on Naturalization](#)
[Yemen: Qatari Mediation; MP Killed; Newspaper License Revoked](#)
[Saudi Arabia: Blogger Released](#)

[Iraq: Journalists Released](#)
[Jordan: Political Party Law; Brotherhood Selects Leaders; Prison Demonstrations](#)
[Syria: Economic Initiatives; Activist Sentenced](#)
[Lebanon: Political Deadlock Continues; Worker Protests](#)
[Tunisia: Opposition Newspaper Seized; Appeals Court Upholds Journalist Sentence](#)
[Algeria: Ban on Passport Photos with Veil and Beard Contested](#)
[Morocco: Criminalizing Violence against Women; Demonstrators Pardoned](#)
[Sudan: Efforts to End Censorship](#)

[Upcoming Political Events](#)
[Views from the Arab Media](#)

Read On

New publications on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Egypt, human rights, Islamist politics, Arab economies, and more.

Subscriber Information

Insights and Analysis

Kuwait: Interview with Ali al-Rashed, National Assembly member and candidate

Who has been responsible for the repeated crises between the Kuwaiti government and the recently dissolved National Assembly?

There were undoubtedly a number of responsible parties, but mainly it was members of the ruling family who were removed from positions of influence and wanted to get back at those who removed them. Such members sometimes would take this out on the prime minister and his first deputy, inciting Assembly members beholden to them to create problems in an effort to have the Assembly dissolved.

How will the law reducing electoral districts from twenty-five to five influence the parliamentary elections scheduled for May 17?

I hope for the better. We must recognize an important truth, which is that the people are used to the twenty-five district system that was in place for twenty-five years. We will not be able to judge the new system by these first elections; it will take another round to get used to the five district system and for it to produce a more effective National Assembly.

What do you say to accusations that the National Assembly has become an obstacle to economic growth?

This is not true, and I do not agree with it. The government merely wants to pin its own shortcomings in achieving growth on the National Assembly, and it uses the huge government media outlets to do this. It does this because the Assembly questions the government and holds it accountable on issues such as deficiencies in hospital, road, and housing construction. We ask why the government has no work program and vision for the years ahead.

When we entered the Assembly, we met with His Highness the Emir and the prime minister and asked them to submit any law or economic development plan that would benefit the country and that they wanted the National Assembly to enact. We were ready to hold a special session and to vote upon any plan without delay. The government did not once request that any law be enacted or voted upon. This shows that the neglect was on the part of the government, not the Assembly.

Do you expect improved cooperation between the government and the new Assembly after the elections?

There will be cooperation when the government has a real vision and specifies what it wants to do for the country with a clearly defined growth program offering specific dates. There will be cooperation when the government understands the meaning of democracy. The government does not know the meaning of democracy because in its view democracy means that the National Assembly approves everything that is presented to it; the government considers any disagreement a lack of cooperation. This means that it considers the views of the Assembly to be always wrong. If the government's understanding does not change, it cannot say that the Assembly is uncooperative.

What is your view of the first experience with women's participation in the 2006 elections? Do you expect any

women to be elected this time?

I hope so. We are now taking the first steps toward social acceptance of female participation in elections. The performances of former minister Massouma al-Mubarak and current Minister of Education Nouria al-Subeih have demonstrated women's abilities. We as a movement remain convinced that women are capable of serving in government, but there are other movements that believe the contrary. We always want to prove that women are capable of achievement, sometimes more so than men.

We as a society need some years to accept the situation and make an historic transition. This is natural in all societies, but I believe that in Kuwait we will achieve this transformation quickly, even before some of those states that had women in parliament before we did.

I am convinced that if women do not win in these elections, then they will in the next elections. But I expect that at least one woman will win in the coming elections and join the Assembly and we will support her. We, the National Democratic Alliance, will include women on our lists.

Do you think that the new Assembly will legalize the formation of political parties? And how would that affect the political process?

I hope that it will. I was the first to propose a law for the formation of political parties in the National Assembly. The current situation is chaotic. We need parties, governed by a law so that their size and funding and foreign links can be made clear. I submitted a draft law, but it was not debated because its turn did not come up. I will do so again in the coming session and will take care to ensure that it is a priority.

How do you see the future of the liberal movement, to which you belong?

I believe the liberal movement will achieve greater acceptance in the future and will attract many Kuwaitis. There are many who are leaving the Islamist movements. This is a good thing because the citizens of Kuwait have begun to realize that these movements are political, and that although they cloak themselves in religion, they are in no way religious. For us it is a matter of time and expansion, particularly in tribal areas where our presence is limited.

The Democratic National Alliance is new, only four years old. This is the first time that a movement of this age has announced candidates for three of the five constituencies; we might have as many as eight candidates. For us, this is not a simple step. We need the people to trust us more and we need greater media outreach and material assistance from our supporters.

In the past there has been some cooperation between liberals and Islamists in the National Assembly; will this be repeated?

That depends on the issue. Sometimes there are common issues, such as the electoral districts, which all agree upon. However, there are issues upon which we do not agree, such as personal freedoms. We, the liberals, consider such freedoms a red line and cannot accept any violation. The Islamists want to be the caretakers of society and we do not accept that.

Might you cooperate on a law legalizing political parties?

Yes, it is possible. We might differ on the details, but we all want a law organizing parties. There is sure to be significant cooperation on this among all of the groups in the National Assembly, not just between us and the Islamists.

The law proposing coeducation, which you proposed, incited a major controversy in Kuwait.

I received death threats because of this law. One zealot, not one of the Islamists, threatened that if I did not withdraw the proposal he would shoot me.

The law of coeducation is extremely simple. It stipulates that male and female students be permitted to study in the same lecture hall in the universities. This law was applied in Kuwait between 1965 and 1996—thirty-one years—but after the emergence of the Islamists in 1996 the situation changed and male and female students were segregated.

Segregation by sex has proved to be a failure culturally, scientifically, and practically. I proposed the coeducation law because it is a natural development and prepares male and female students to work in society. I have faced a number of

accusations, but I have also been surprised by the extent of popular support the bill has enjoyed. This shows that I stirred something in the hearts of the people. They support this approach and this proposal, which I will continue to push until it is enacted, because we refuse paternalism and it is our right to choose how we educate our children. I will continue the struggle against any effort to infringe upon our freedoms.

Michele Dunne conducted this interview and Kevin Burnham translated it from Arabic.

[Return to table of contents.](#) **Printer-friendly version.**

Egypt: Second Generation Internet Users and Political Change

Ahmad Zaki Osman

Although the general strikes on April 6 and May 4 have drawn limited public participation, they have revealed an important new political phenomenon in Egypt: political mobilization by young, second generation internet users via blogs, YouTube, and Facebook. After two years of intensive government efforts to outmaneuver the opposition, this mobilization caught the regime flat-footed. It highlighted the possible role of interactive non-traditional media in bringing about political change in Egypt, just as the government's heavy-handed response to the strikes revealed its failure to find new forms of political control aside from the usual repression by the security apparatus.

The growing role of non-traditional media has pushed the state to try to curb them through various mechanisms. Several bloggers have been arrested, including Moneim Mahmoud (editor of the [Ana ikhwan](#) or "I am Brotherhood" blog). Isra Abdel Fattah, who started a Facebook group calling for Egyptians to join the April 6 strike (over 74,000 joined the group), was also arrested and held for sixteen days. The blogger Wael Abbas (editor of the [al-Wa'i al-misri](#), or "Egyptian Awareness" blog) has been vilified in the government media due to his success in documenting Egyptian police brutality inside detention centers in video clips he posted on YouTube. And in February 2007, blogger Karim Amer was sentenced to four years in prison in 2007 for criticizing President Hosni Mubarak and religious institutions.

In the past few years, bloggers and other internet users have played several different roles in Egyptian politics. First, internet users have voiced direct criticism of President Mubarak's regime. For example, bloggers went beyond criticizing the amended Article 76 of the constitution, which regulates the process for presidential elections, and mobilized to record the flagrant abuses that tarnished the popular referendum on the amendment in May 2005, notably the sexual harassment of female journalists. The bloggers also stood in solidarity with the reformist judges who were subject to systematic attacks by circles close to the regime.

Bloggers have played a crucial role in uncovering abuses by institutions loyal to the regime. The spread of mobile phone video technology enabled bloggers to reveal incidents of torture in a number of detention centers, incidents that later became legal cases before the courts. Such efforts built bridges between bloggers and domestic human rights groups; some blogs now systematically map detention facilities in which officers commonly physically abuse detainees. The political opposition has used bloggers' documentation to attack the regime for its use of torture not only as a means of suppressing political opposition but also in controlling political and social mobility.

Another area of blogger activism is the state of religious minorities, an extremely sensitive issue in Egypt. During the last three years, some blogs have specialized in transmitting the views of religious minorities in Egypt, as well as forms of discrimination practiced against them. Perhaps the most prominent examples are the blogs founded by members of the Baha'i religion. Blogs such as [Baha'i misri](#) (Egyptian Baha'i) and [Min wijhat nazar ukhra](#) (From Another Perspective) have become not only a source of information on the Baha'i sect and their situation in Egypt, but also a way to mobilize support for their demands. There are also blogs that document religious discrimination against Christians, expressing criticism that differs radically from the conciliatory political discourse of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church. Here, the blog [Aqbat bila hudud](#) (Copts without Borders), edited by Hala Butrus, has given voice to those who see discrimination against Christians as being rooted not only in society but in the state and question the regime's official discourse about "national unity."

Yet another area that bloggers are probing is the battle over strategies for various political players. Some recent examples include blogs by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and their debates over the draft party platform put forward by the Guidance Bureau in 2007. In the past, Brotherhood blogs served mainly to express the movement's political ideas and recruit new members, for example students. In discussing the platform, however, the blogs expressed and crystallized the struggle between the reformists (such as [Ana ikhwan](#)) and the conservatives. Most Brotherhood blogs joined the reformist side of the debate, rejecting ideas such as supervision of the executive and legislative branches by a board of religious scholars or exclusion of women and Copts from the presidency. Brotherhood bloggers are also credited with bringing disagreements over the platform out from behind closed doors—as they are now doing with many political topics that were once taboo in Egypt.

Ahmad Zaki Osman is a journalist for the Egyptian daily al-Badeel. Paul Wulfsberg translated this article from Arabic.

[Return to table of contents.](#) [Printer-friendly version.](#)

Jordan/Egypt: Why Don't the Benefits of Growth Trickle Down?

Ibrahim Saif and Ava Leone

Recent labor protests and bread lines in Egypt—in which the army was called in to organize distribution and restore order—present a stark contrast to the Egyptian government's narrative of impressive economic growth, which international financial institutions have validated. Jordan has not experienced serious protests recently, but it is also witnessing growing complaints about inflation despite notable economic growth. In both countries, the private sector has begun to play a much larger role, gross domestic product (GDP) has accelerated, and foreign direct investment, financial markets, and real estate are booming. Yet the two countries' economies have thus far failed to address the needs of their poorest citizens, who feel the acute inflation in basic commodity prices. The gap between the rich and poor has not been reduced and unemployment levels remain stagnant.

Jordan's real GDP grew steadily at an annual rate of 6 percent from 2003 to 2007. Investment surged from JD 52.8 million (\$74.8 million) in 2002 to JD 2.2 billion (\$3.1 billion) in 2006 and all other macro indicators are similarly positive. Nevertheless, unemployment remains static at approximately 14 percent and the number of Jordanians living below the poverty line—estimated at 14.7 percent in recent government reports—has not declined.

There are many explanations for this welfare-less growth. First, growth in Jordan has come from just a few sectors such as manufacturing, telecommunications, and construction. Within the manufacturing sector, most jobs resulted from qualifying industrial zones, designated areas that produce and export to U.S. markets. Investors mainly came from South Asia and based their competitiveness on cheap labor; 54 percent of some 40,000 new jobs in manufacturing have gone to non-Jordanians. In the construction sector, most new jobs also benefited foreign labor, primarily from Egypt. Thus, these sectors experienced growth and job creation, yet very little that benefited unemployed Jordanians. When new jobs were filled by Jordanians, they tended to be in low-paying sectors such as domestic services. These jobs are generally characterized by unacceptable working conditions and a lack of social security or overtime arrangements that protect workers.

The Jordanian finance and telecommunication sectors do create high-paying jobs, but they require levels of education that the poor normally do not possess. That growth has not benefited the poor is confirmed by the Gini coefficient—one of the most common means of measuring income inequality, where 0 corresponds to perfect equality and 1 to perfect inequality—which remained stagnant at 0.37 between 2002 and 2006. Jordan's unchanging ratio suggests that despite economic growth, no structural change has taken place in terms of income or consumption that would permit greater mobility between social classes.

In Egypt, real GDP grew at a sluggish 1.7 percent in 2003 but has climbed steadily since, reaching 6.8 percent in 2007 and expected to exceed 7 percent for the 2007/2008 fiscal year. As a result of the 2.4 million new jobs, unemployment fell from 10.5 percent in 2006 to 9 percent in 2007. Just as in Jordan, however, growth in Egypt has come largely in sectors (energy, telecommunications, and construction) that do not employ unskilled workers, thus cannot absorb the 20 percent of citizens who live below the poverty line. The real estate market has been booming, putting housing increasingly out of the reach of the poor. Furthermore, the government has been forced to maintain food subsidies, leading to a budget deficit that in 2007 reached 7.5 percent of GDP and is expected to increase in 2008.

Hardship for many Egyptians is likely to increase. As in Jordan, the Egyptian government has begun to align energy prices with the international market, and intends to phase out most industrial energy subsidies by 2010. Egyptians—many of whom have stagnant wages—thus are beginning to feel the effect of global increases in energy and food prices, leading to an inflation rate of 6.2 percent in 2006 and 8.8 percent in 2007. Inflation has been concentrated in items such as food and basic commodities, which constitute a significant share of a household's consumption. In 2007, food items accounted for 44 percent of total inflation and increased energy costs contributed 13.5 percent. Shortages also are emerging, as the recent bread crisis demonstrated.

Economic reform has also led to other changes that are beginning to spark unrest in Egypt. Thirty-eight percent of Egyptians who receive wages or salaries work without formal contracts or social insurance; in the private sector, the number is an astounding 71 percent. There is evidence that privatization has led to deterioration in health and safety conditions, as the Ministry of Manpower and Trade Unions tries to create a balance between the rights of workers and the economic interests of private sector owners. As a result, in 2007-8, Egypt witnessed an intensity of worker strikes and mobilization that had not been seen in decades. The strikes began in clothing factories, but have since spread to include a broader spectrum of the Egyptian working class and have increasingly become political in nature.

It is possible that both Egypt and Jordan are witnessing transition periods and that eventually the benefits of remarkable economic growth will trickle down to the poor. For now, the poor are suffering disproportionately from the inflation that often accompanies growth, as well as from global price trends. Inflation is generally more prevalent in food items and basic commodities that constitute the largest share of the poor's consumption basket. Conversely, property and equity owners can adapt their expenditures and are more protected against the consequences of inflation. Considering the troubling political implications, it would behoove the Jordanian and Egyptian governments to formulate comprehensive macroeconomic policies to promote trickle down sooner rather than later. In this regard, governments should revise their fiscal policies toward subsidizing those in need rather than subsidizing all. Governments should also work to dismantle monopolies, particularly in commodity markets, so that the poor can negotiate more effectively.

Ibrahim Saif is a resident associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. Ava Leone is currently working as a researcher in the Economics Unit of Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan.

[Return to table of contents.](#) [Printer-friendly version.](#)

Syria: Will the Anti-Trust Law Make a Difference?

Joshua Landis

On April 4, Syria issued its first Competition and Anti-Trust Law (Law No 7/2008), which some observers consider a significant marker on the road from a planned to a market economy. The anti-trust legislation follows on the heels of several new laws issued over the past months, including a new commercial law, an incorporation law, and an arbitration law, replacing old ones dating to 1949. All are designed to open the way for private investment, including foreign investment, and to bring Syria into line with international legal and business practices.

Kanaan al-Ahmar, the Syrian attorney who played a large role in drafting the anti-trust law (click [here](#) for the entire text in Arabic), told editor Jihad Yazigi of *The Syria Report* (Syria's top economic digest) that the Competition and Anti-Trust law has five main provisions:

- Market prices are to be set by free competition, with the exception of some specified cases. Al-Ahmar notes that until now the government set prices and issued occasional regulations to liberalize them; now it is the other way round.
- Cartels and other agreements, whether written or oral, which could disrupt free competition in the market are prohibited.
- No economic entity may abuse its dominant position in the market.
- Traders and manufacturers are prohibited from imposing minimum prices for the resale of their products/services, from selling below cost, or from disrupting supply to the market (in order to drive up prices).
- The law establishes a Competition Council that must give permission for any merger or acquisition that leads a company to hold a market share of over 30 percent for any product or service.

But no law is better than the authority that oversees and upholds it. Yazigi explains that "the text of the anti-trust law is as good and modern as any equivalent law in another country. Syria's business environment has been significantly improved by this and the other laws promulgated recently. However, implementation will be a problem; one should not expect too much in the short-term. Most members of the body in charge of overseeing its implementation are appointed by the government. In other words, it is a very good law that will require political reform before it works as efficiently as it is meant to."

The government will completely control the thirteen-member Competition Council that will monitor the law's implementation. Serving at the pleasure of the prime minister, the body will include eight financial and legal experts selected by various ministers and heads of government financial commissions, three businessmen selected by the Federations of Chambers of Commerce, and two unionists, one from the General Workers Union and another from the Peasants Union.

Among the key questions about the implementation of the new law is how, if at all, it will apply to industries currently dominated by the state. One Syrian businessman, a Wall Street executive who has numerous interests in Syria, said "It is not monopolies within the private sector that bother us businessmen; it is the state monopolies. The state owns some 250 different businesses of which only eight or so are profitable. They belong to the telecom and petroleum industries. The others are almost all dogs and produce tires, beer, biscuits, bottled water, cigarettes...the list goes on. Every businessman I know wants to get into these fields; there is good money to be made, but the state has to give up its monopolies first."

At the same time, despite their continuing frustration at the slow pace of change and continuing heavy hand of the state, many Syrian businessmen believe that the government is on the right track. "If Bashar has done one thing, he has changed some of the archaic and idiotic laws," one businessman said. President al-Assad also has opened up several strategic industries—banking, insurance, and advertising—to private capital. Investor response in these industries has been very good. Initial public offerings (IPO) of banks entering into the Syrian market have been oversubscribed. When Bank Audi entered the Syrian market in 2005, its IPO was oversubscribed by a massive 988 percent. Fransabank, the newest entrant into Syria just had its IPO in March, which was oversubscribed by 250 percent of the value of the offering.

The success of the financial sector has whetted the appetite of regional investors. And while it is not clear how well the new anti-trust and other laws will be implemented, they are already succeeding in creating the impression that Syria has become investment friendly. Still, business people are savvy about the risks in such an uncertain environment. A recent proposal for a \$50 million venture in Syria began with the caution: "This proposal is being offered to sophisticated investors who could, in the worst case, afford to sustain the loss of their entire investment." Investing in Syria is not for the faint of heart.

Joshua Landis co-directs the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

[Return to table of contents.](#) *Printer-friendly version.*

Gulf States: Competing in Educational Reform

Amal Sakr

Educational reforms in Gulf Cooperation Council states are often attributed to U.S. pressure, as many in Washington believe that curricula in these countries have encouraged extremism and terrorism. In fact, economic globalization and changes in domestic politics have motivated educational change even more than external pressures related to terrorism. The ascendant, ambitious Gulf countries, especially those with skyrocketing revenues and rapid economic development, are eager to reshape and enhance their international image and fulfilling labor market requirements in a competitive international environment. Politics also have changed in these states, with the Arab-Israeli conflict now taking a back seat to domestic issues and growing nationalist sentiment.

Gulf educational development projects in many cases go well beyond curricular reform and adopt a holistic approach addressing teacher training, instructional methodology, assessment procedures, school buildings, responsiveness to labor market requirements, and foreign language education. It is true that some countries—Saudi Arabia in particular—are modifying their curricula. In the Kingdom, curricula for various religious subjects (Qur'an, Qur'anic recitation, theology, jurisprudence, and studies of the Prophet Muhammad) and the Arabic language have been reorganized and rewritten. Other subjects also have been consolidated and new topics, such as human rights, have been added. Other Gulf countries generally have needed to make only minor changes in religion and Arabic language.

Among the striking shared aspects of educational reform in all of the Gulf countries has been the frankness with which ministries of education have acknowledged poor performance to date. In fact, they sometimes seem to be competing to outdo one another in self-criticism, while agreeing on the need for development and launching various initiatives.

The small Gulf States have been particularly nimble in getting educational initiatives off the ground, focusing on the goal of founding top-notch schools. The United Arab Emirates began in 1999 with the "Vision 2020" plan. It now has "Partnership Schools," "Schools of Tomorrow," and "Model Schools;" there are also individual educational councils in each emirate carrying out development plans in cooperation with the UAE ministry of education. In Qatar, there is the "Education for a New Era" initiative overseen by the Supreme Education Council (established in 2002), as well as the "Independent Schools" initiative, in which schools are given broad powers to develop educational methodologies and curricula without centralized government control. The goal is for all Qatari schools to become independent in the coming years. In Bahrain, there are the "Schools of the Future" (established 2004), and the "National Project to Develop Education," directed by Australian education expert Martin Forest.

In all of these schools, English language education occupies a special place. Math and science education in English have absolute priority in the UAE and Qatari plans, while technology appears to be a prominent feature of the Bahraini experiment. In all three countries foreign experts have a noticeable presence, as do global consulting companies. Officials frequently invoke the experiences of countries notable for educational success—such as Singapore, Canada, and New Zealand—and seek to carry out joint programs with such countries or at least replicate their practices.

In Kuwait, which has huge oil revenues, the cabinet in 2003 adopted the "Education Development Strategy 2005-2025," and there is talk of other initiatives, but apparently without trying to approach educational problems in depth or apply experiments as extensive as those in the UAE and Qatar. The debate over education in Kuwait is constrained by ideological

confrontations between Islamists and liberals, and dominated by issues such as the mixing of the sexes rather than concern about upgrading quality. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, it seems that long educational histories have made the bureaucratic legacy an impediment to far-reaching initiatives, while ideological disputes prevent the emergence of new ideas.

Saudi Arabia has been slower than the small states in introducing educational reform and so far its programs have been less comprehensive. In mid-2007, the “King Abdullah Project for Education Development” was announced; so far the project consists of general principles without operational plans, although 9 billion riyals (\$2.3 billion) over six years have already been earmarked.

The fact is that Saudi Arabia’s problem is complicated, for in a country where school students number some five million and teachers are underpaid (monthly salaries at private schools run 2,000 riyals, or U.S. \$550; public school salaries are about double that), any reform attempt will be fraught with economic dangers. Any attempt to evaluate teachers and eliminate unqualified ones, for example, would be controversial. In addition there are strong religious currents wary of educational reform. Expanding English language education, for instance, would require fighting major battles on that front.

The educational reforms being introduced by the smaller Gulf countries—flush with hydrocarbon revenues and with a limited number of schools to be reformed—appear promising, but the results of development efforts are still unknown. Previous initiatives have fizzled despite heavy investments and it will be some time before it becomes clear whether the current experiments are succeeding.

Amal Sakr is an Egyptian political researcher specializing in the Gulf. Paul Wulfsberg translated this article from Arabic.

[Return to table of contents.](#) ***Printer-friendly version.***

Readers React

In his [article](#) on the Moroccan electoral system (April 2008), Michael Meyer-Resende concludes that, based on the results of the September 2007 parliamentary elections the system is not as unfair as is generally believed. Meyer-Resende correctly points out that the fragmentation of Moroccan politics has causes other than the electoral system. He understates, however, the impact of particular electoral rules on political parties.

I would argue that Morocco’s electoral system is designed less to manipulate electoral results than to insulate the monarchy from electoral accountability. Morocco’s strange brew of proportional representation with very low district magnitudes, combined with a complicated “largest remainder” formula for allocating seats, made it very difficult for any political party to win more than one seat per district. Thus, many parties merely sought the minimum threshold of votes in the country’s ninety-five multi-member electoral districts. In addition, the composition of the electoral districts effectively diluted the strength of the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD). Although the PJD underperformed in many areas, it would have fared much better under a majoritarian formula. For example, had each of Morocco’s sixteen regions allocated all of their seats to the party with a plurality of the vote, the PJD would have won more than one-third of the seats in parliament. This outcome could have led to a viable coalition with another party, a working majority in the lower house, and a potential counterweight to the palace.

On a final note, Meyer-Resende claims that one of the principal conclusions of the foreign observers was that the electoral system was unfair. As one of the foreign observers that helped finalize the National Democratic Institute’s post-election statement issued on September 8, 2007, I take issue with that claim and would argue that NDI’s election assessments did not go far enough in singling out particular electoral rules for greater scrutiny and criticism. The rules of the game matter and Morocco’s electoral rules are no exception.

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Send your views on what you have read in the *Arab Reform Bulletin* to the editor at arb@carnegieendowment.org.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

News and Views

Egypt: Salary and Price Increases; Local Elections; Brothers Sentenced

The Egyptian parliament rushed through a package of increases in the price of fuel, cigarettes, and vehicle licenses on May 5 in order to pay for a 30 percent increase in public sector salaries proposed by President Hosni Mubarak on April 30. Several cabinet members and National Democratic Party (NDP) parliamentarians reportedly opposed the price increases, which passed in the People's Assembly by a vote of 297 to 76 (the NDP holds 366 of the Assembly's 454 seats). The steep increases—roughly 40 per cent for gasoline, for example—were implemented May 6. Click [here](#) for more information.

The government's moves followed strikes on April 6 and May 4 to protest inflation, low wages, and poor worker conditions. The April 6 strike was not widely observed, but there were protests in several cities and some industrial workers, particularly in the Nile Delta town of al-Mahalla al-Kubra, took to the streets and defaced pictures of President Mubarak. Security forces clashed with protesters in al-Mahalla, leading to one reported death. Authorities arrested several well-known opposition figures, including Kifaya activists George Ishaq and Mohammed Abdel Quddus, on suspicion of instigating the April 6 protests; they were released a few days later. Facebook organizer Isra Abdel Fattah was arrested and held until April 23. The May 4 strike, called to mark Mubarak's eightieth birthday, drew weak participation although the Muslim Brotherhood called on its members to participate. Click [here](#) for more information.

On April 8, the National Democratic Party won over 95 percent of the 53,000 seats in local council elections. The Muslim Brotherhood announced a last-minute boycott of the elections after nearly all of its candidates—as well as most candidates from legal opposition parties—were prevented from registering. Independent civil society monitors were denied permission to observe elections, but informal reports suggest that voter turnout was extremely low.

On April 15, an Egyptian military court convicted twenty-five members of the Muslim Brotherhood (five in absentia) for membership in an illegal organization and attempting to revive its military wing. Fifteen were acquitted, but the rest received unusually harsh sentences ranging from three to ten years in prison. Those tried in absentia in particular received 10 year sentences. Deputy Supreme Guide Khayrat al-Shatir, the third highest-ranking Brotherhood leader, was sentenced to seven years in prison. Amnesty International issued a [statement](#) condemning the trial.

Kuwait: Elections; Tribal Demonstration; Anti-demonstration Law Revoked

On May 17, Kuwait will hold general elections for fifty parliamentary seats; an additional fifteen ministers sit in the assembly as ex officio members. The parliament was dissolved March 19 following resignation of the cabinet. Some 360,000 Kuwaitis over age 21 are eligible to vote. This will be the second general election in which women will participate, and the first since electoral districts were reduced from twenty-five to five. Non governmental organizations such as the Kuwaiti Association for Developing Democracy and Kuwait Transparency Association plan to [monitor](#) the elections. The main political blocks include the Islamic Constitutional Movement, the Salafi Movement, the National Islamic Alliance, and the liberal National Democratic Movement.

On May 4, thousands of Kuwaitis protested in front of a government security building demanding the release of members of the Mateer tribe arrested for carrying out unauthorized tribal primaries. Click [here](#) for more details in Arabic.

On April 14, the Kuwaiti government reversed a recent law banning public assembly and peaceful demonstrations. The law contradicted a prior ruling of Kuwait's Constitutional Court granting Kuwaitis the right to demonstrate peacefully and was passed by decree on April 7 after the parliament had been dissolved. The government withdrew the new law after much public criticism and demonstrations. Click [here](#) for more details in Arabic.

Bahrain: New Press Bill; Minister Questioned on Naturalization

On May 6, Bahraini Information Minister Jihad Bin Hassan Bukamal proposed a new press law. The bill reportedly will abrogate jail sentences for journalists but imprisonment will still be possible in cases of insulting religion or the ruler or compromising national unity. The bill was passed to the parliament for review and approval. Click [here](#) for additional details.

On April 29, Bahraini opposition MPs prevented pro-government legislators from excluding the prime minister and his deputies from recently-passed legislation that requires financial disclosure from top government officials. The new law requires financial statements and asserts the right to investigate any suspicious accumulation of wealth by ministers and members of parliament and their spouses. Click [here](#) for additional information.

On April 24, the parliament questioned Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Ahmed bin Attiyatallah al-Khalifain about accusations of tampering with national statistics and willfully providing incorrect data. The minister was accused of doing so as part of an effort to naturalize large numbers of Sunnis in order to tip the demographic balance. Al-Khalifain refuted all allegations but Shi'i opposition deputies said they intend to call him for more questioning. Click [here](#) for more information in Arabic.

Yemen: Qatari Mediation; MP Killed; Newspaper License Revoked

Qatar has launched a mediation process between the Yemeni government and Abdel Malik al-Houthi, leader of a Zaidi rebellion in the north. The first meeting among Qatari mediators, Yemeni government officials, and representatives of al-Houthi took place on May 4. Click [here](#) for more information in Arabic.

Yemeni MP Saleh Hendi was killed on April 18 near Saada governorate, where government forces have been fighting with rebels.

On April 5, the Yemeni government revoked the license of *al-Wasat* newspaper on accusations of harming relations with Saudi Arabia. The newspaper published an article alleging that Saudi Arabia was responsible for smuggling and abusing Yemeni children. The Committee to Protect Journalists issued a [statement](#) on April 7 condemning the Yemeni government's decision.

Saudi Arabia: Blogger Released

Saudi blogger Fouad al-Farhan, detained since December 2007, was released on April 27. Various international organizations and other Saudi bloggers have been calling for his release. Click [here](#) for more information.

Iraq: Journalists Released

Iraqi forces freed CBS news journalist Richard Butler on April 14. He had been abducted, along with his interpreter, two months earlier in Basra. The interpreter was released a few days after the abduction.

U.S. forces freed Associated Press photographer Bilal Hussein on April 16, after a two-year detention. Hussein was accused of cooperating with insurgents but no evidence against him was ever disclosed. The Committee to Protect Journalists has documented several cases in which the U.S. military detained journalists without charges or evidence. Click [here](#) for additional information.

Jordan: Political Party Law; Brotherhood Selects Leaders; Prison Demonstrations

On April 16 a new Jordanian political party law went into effect. Parliament passed the law in 2007 but the government agreed to give parties a grace period to organize themselves. Newspapers have reported that only fourteen of Jordan's thirty-six political parties have been able to comply with the new regulations, which include obtaining a certificate of government support and an increase in minimum party membership from 50 to 500. Parties unable to comply, including eight of the fourteen-party opposition coalition, were forced to dissolve and are calling the new law unconstitutional. The Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jordan's largest opposition party, was able to comply with the new law. Click [here](#) for more information in Arabic.

The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood selected a new governing body at its third national council meeting on May 1, after a postponement caused by disagreement between conservative and liberal members. After long discussions, the members reportedly agreed to appoint a predominantly liberal group to balance recently elected General Guide Humam Sa'id, who is considered a conservative. Click [here](#) for more information in Arabic.

On April 14, revolts broke out in at al-Muwaqar prison in southwestern Amman, reportedly due to the inhumane treatment of inmates. The violence initially left three prisoners dead and led to additional protests leaving thirty injured. The protest has garnered support from Jordanian opposition parties with the IAF being the most vocal.

Syria: Economic Initiatives; Activist Sentenced

As part of a package of economic reform initiatives (see article above), President Bashar al-Assad on April 15 issued a presidential decree that increased the sentence for stealing public funds from five to ten years. The Syrian Finance Minister indicated that the measure was part of an effort to overhaul the public sector and promote transparency and accountability.

On April 23, a Syrian military court sentenced political activist Kamal Labwani to a three-year prison term, in addition to the twelve year sentence he is currently serving. The government claims that Labwani insulted the president while in prison. Human rights groups called the charge unjust and politically motivated. The U.S. State Department and the European Union called for Labwani's release.

Lebanon: Political Deadlock Continues; Worker Protests

On April 22, the Lebanese parliament postponed a session to elect a new president until May 13. This is the eighteenth postponement since President Lahud left office in November 2007.

On May 7, worker strikes turned into clashes between government and opposition supporters in Beirut, leading to the closure of many roads and the airport. The cabinet agreed on May 6 to raise monthly minimum wages from approximately \$200 to \$330, but Hizbollah-backed activists are demanding a raise to \$600 per month. Government supporters are accusing Hizbollah of using economic grievances to destabilize the government; click [here](#) for more information.

Tunisia: Opposition Newspaper Seized; Appeal Court Upholds Journalist Sentence

Tunisia's highest court upheld journalist Salim Boukhdir's one year jail sentence on April 3. Boukhdir, correspondent for *al-Quds al-'arabi*, was convicted in December 2007 for "insulting behavior toward an official" after an incident in which he refused to produce identity papers. The April 3 ruling was Boukhdir's final chance for appeal. Click [here](#) for more information.

Reporters Without Borders issued a [statement](#) on April 18 condemning the Tunisian government's harassment of the weekly newspaper *al-Mawaqif*, published by the opposition Progressive Democratic Party. Since March 14, the government has seized issues of the weekly and has brought a libel suit against editor Rachid Khechana, who is due to appear in court on May 10.

Algeria: Ban on Passport Photos with Veil and Beard Contested

The Society of Algerian Muslim Scholars issued a *fatwa* on April 23 against the government ban on passport pictures of veiled women and bearded men. The *fatwa* claims that the ban infringes upon Islamic law and that both the veil and beard are integral to the Muslim tradition. Click [here](#) for more information.

Morocco: Criminalizing Violence against Women; Demonstrators Pardoned

King Muhammad pardoned on April 4 eight demonstrators convicted in 2007 on charges of undermining the monarchy. The eight men, all members of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, were detained after chanting slogans critical of the monarchy. Click [here](#) for additional information.

The Moroccan government continues its effort to curb violence against women. The Ministry of Social Development, Family, and Solidarity announced it is drafting a bill that would criminalize domestic violence. The law is part of a broader plan that also involves setting up treatment centers for victims of domestic violence. Click [here](#) for more details.

Sudan: Efforts to End Censorship

On April 16, the Sudanese government reportedly agreed with the Sudanese Journalists' Union to end government censorship of journalism. Reporters will no longer submit stories and reports to government censors prior to publishing. Click [here](#) for more information.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Upcoming Political Events

- Kuwait: Parliamentary elections, May 17
- Lebanon: Nineteenth attempt to elect a new president, May 13

Views from the Arab Media

The April 22 [episode](#) of *al-Jazeera's* "al-Ittijaah al-Mu'akis" (The Opposite Direction) discussed recent social unrest caused by increase in inflation and cost of living. The debate centered on the discrepancy between high living costs and low wages as well as the Arab governments' lack of response. University professor Muhammad Meqdadi blamed the current state of Arab economies on globalization, while Egyptian economist Rashad Abdu argued that globalization is inevitable and that the problem is the Arab economies' inability to keep up with global markets and follow sound economic policies.

The April 27 [episode](#) of *al-Jazeera's* "Ma Wara' al-Khabar" (Behind the News) focused on the upcoming trial of former Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz. Dr. Nabil Yassin, a London based Iraqi writer and political analyst asserted that Tareq Aziz and all those involved with the Ba'th regime are guilty of a variety of crimes among them oppressing the opposition and isolating Iraqi society. Mr. Badi' Aref, Tareq Aziz's lawyer stressed that the charges against him are unfounded and that this is a plot to implicate him simply because he was part of the regime.

Imad Marmal [commented](#) in the Lebanese daily *al-Safir* on April 18 on the Lebanese political deadlock and the recent efforts of Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, to initiate dialogue amongst the various Lebanese factions. Marmal asked why Saudi Arabia has refused to meet with Berri and speculated that the Saudi message is clear: a president must be elected with no further delays.

Sateh Nouredine argued in a sardonic [commentary](#) published in the Lebanese daily *al-Safir* on April 21 that the U.S. administration has emerged as the uncontested champion of Arab nationalism. Nouredine said the United States has undertaken campaigns to revive feelings of Arab nationalism among Iraqis after Washington realized that the Sunni-Shi'i divide would only weaken its position in Iraq and strengthen Iranian influence.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Read On

Recent publications on **Iraq** include:

- In [“The Unraveling of Iraq: Ethnosectarian Preferences and State Performance in Historical Perspective”](#) Adeed Dawisha argues that sectarian tensions have always existed in Iraq, but that today’s ethno-sectarian chaos is the result of state weakness (*Middle East Journal*, vol. 62, no. 2, April 2008).
- [“Iraq After the Surge: Options and Questions,”](#) by Daniel Serwer and Sam Parker (United States Institute of Peace, April 2008).
- Steven Simon contends in his recent article [“The Price of the Surge”](#) that the U.S. military surge—a short term solution for sectarian violence—may have come at the expense of a long term sustainable solution (*Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, n. 3, May/June 2008).
- [Three Kings in Baghdad - The Tragedy of Iraq's Monarchy](#), by Gerald De Gaury recounts the short rule of the Iraqi monarchy (I.B. Tauris, March 2008).
- In [“From Developmental Nationalism to the End of Nation-state in Iraq?”](#) Martin Bunton argues that the transition from developmental to cultural nationalism may lead to the unraveling of the Iraqi nation-state, especially in the absence of centralized government institutions (*Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 3, April 2008, 631-46).

Publications on the **Arab-Israeli conflict** include:

- In [“Sixty Years of Israel: Breaking the Logic,”](#) Khaled Hroub argues that the 1967 war and accompanying Arab rhetorical threats created the logic behind the ideas of a greater Israel and Israel’s use of preemptive warfare. (*The World Today*, vol. 46, no. 4, April 2008).
- [“Israel at Sixty: Young Country, Same Old Conflict,”](#) by Yossi Mekelberg (*The World Today*, vol. 64, no. 4, April 2008).
- In [“The EU, Israel and Hamas,”](#) Clara O’Donnell suggests to Europe and its U.S. and Israeli allies the importance of engaging Hamas in peace talks (Center for European Reform, April 2008).
- [“The Long Dance: Searching for Arab-Israeli Peace,”](#) by Aaron David Miller (*The Wilson Quarterly*, spring 2008).
- In [“Free Speech and the Question of Israel: A British Perspective”](#) Avi Shlaim discusses the attacks on the rights of academics to criticize Israel (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, May 2008, 193-4).
- [“A Nahda of Charitable Organizations? Health Service Provision and the Politics of Aid in Palestine,”](#) by Benoit Challand (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, May 2008, 227-47).

- [Shifting Ethnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel](#), by Aziza Khazzoom (Stanford University Press, March 2008).

Several new publications discuss **Islamist politics**:

- In [The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State](#), Noah Feldman contends that Islamic constitutional rule failed in the past but that a modern Islamic state could succeed if supported by new institutions that guarantee a constitutional balance of power (Princeton University Press, April 2008).
- In ["Radical Islamism and Failed Developmentalism,"](#) Saeed Rahnama contends that the emergence of radical Islamist movements is often a product of failed secular regimes and is linked to imperialism and authoritarianism (*Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 3, April 2008, 483-96).
- ["The Status of Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East: Does Regime Type Make a Difference?"](#) by Todd Spinks and Emile Sahliyeh (*Democratization*, vol. 15, no 2, April 2008, 321-41).
- [Travelers among Europe's Muslim Neighbours: the Quest for Democracy](#), by EU parliamentarians Joost Lagendijk and Jan Marinus Wiersma, argues that a European Neighborhood Policy toward its southern neighbors should promote stronger cooperation based on the shared values of democracy, rule of law, and freedom (Center for European Policy Studies, April 2008).

Publications on **Egypt** include:

- In ["Underbelly of Egypt's Neoliberal Agenda"](#) Joel Beinin provides an analysis of government-imposed neo-liberal economic policies and their consequences for Egyptian workers (Middle East Report Online, April 5, 2008).
- ["Egypt's Local Elections Farce: Causes and Consequences,"](#) by Amr Hamzawy and Mohammed Herzallah (Carnegie Policy Outlook no. 40, April 2008).

Publications on **human rights** include:

- ["Perpetual Minors: Human Rights Abuses Stemming from Male Guardianship and Sex Segregation in Saudi Arabia"](#) (Human Rights Watch, April 2008). Click [here](#) for Arabic.
- ["Resurrecting the Wall of Fear: The Human Rights Situation in Syria,"](#) by Robert Grace (United States Institute of Peace, April 2008).

Recent publications on **economic issues** include:

- [Rebuilding Devastated Economies in the Middle East](#), by Leonard Binder (Palgrave Macmillian, April 2008).
- [Flowing Oil and Crude Politics](#), by Rafael Kandiyoti (I.B. Tauris, April 2008).
- ["How Favoritism Affects the Business Climate: Empirical Evidence from Jordan,"](#) by Markus Loewe, Jonas Blume and Johanna Speer (*Middle East Journal*, vol. 62. no. 2, April 2008).

Publications on the **impact of outside powers** in the region, including the implications of upcoming **U.S. presidential elections** include:

- ["United States Elections and the Islamic World: Breaking the Mould,"](#) by Maha Azzam. (*The World Today*, Chatham House, vol. 64, no. 4, April 2008).
- In ["Clearing the Air in the Middle East"](#) Bassma Kodmani discusses possible implications for the Middle East from a

new U.S. administration (*Current History*, May 2008).

- [Freedom's Unsteady March: America's Role in Building Arab Democracy](#), by Tamara Cofman Wittes (Brookings Institute Press, March 2008).
- In [The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East](#) Olivier Roy concludes that any solution to regional conflicts must involve engaging the real political forces in the region, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. (Columbia University Press, April 2008).

Other publications on **reform-related developments** in the region include:

- The U.S. Department of State's [Country Report on Terrorism 2007](#), released April 30, identifies Syria and Iran as state sponsors of terrorism. The report discusses the positive impact of government transition in Mauritania on lessening terrorist threats and activities in West Africa. It also highlights the growing threat of al-Qaeda in North Africa and the group's affiliation with regional insurgent groups, particularly in Iraq.
- ["What is at Stake in Kuwait's Parliamentary Elections?"](#) by Nathan J. Brown (Carnegie Web Commentary, May 2006).
- In ["When Memory Repeats Itself: The Politics of Heritage in Post Civil War Lebanon"](#) Lucia Volk discusses the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's program to help prevent "collective amnesia" in Lebanon (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, May 2008, 291-314).
- In ["Beyond Darfur"](#) Andrew S. Natsios argues that the continued survival of the Sudanese state is in jeopardy (*Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 3, May/June 2008).
- In ["Militarizing Welfare: Neo-liberalism and Jordanian Policy"](#) Anne Marie Baylouny claims that neo-liberal economic policies in Jordan have changed the composition of the regime's traditional support base (*Middle East Journal*, vol. 62., no. 2, April 2008).
- ["Morocco 1996-2007 a Decisive Decade for Reform"](#) (Arab Reform Initiative, April 1, 2008).
- ["Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys from Arab States"](#) by David Pollock (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2008).
- The April issue of [al-Mustaqbal al-'arabi](#) (*Arab Future*), published by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut, discusses the U.S. engagement in Iraq; the quality of scientific research in Arab universities; and the integration of Arab and Muslim populations into German society.
- The April issue of [al-Majala al-'arabiya lil-'ulum al-siyasiya](#) (*Arab Journal of Political Science*), published by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut, includes a special report on democracy and election monitoring in Egypt, Islam through Western eyes, and Iraq and security in the Gulf region.
- The Center for Arab Unity Studies published a report titled [Hal al-umma al-'arabiya 2007-2008: thunaiyat al-tafteet wal-ikhтираq](#) (*The State of the Arab Nation 2007-2008: Duality of Fragmentation and Penetration*). The report is a collection of articles that address general trends in Arab politics including democracy, unity, and economic performance, particularly recent increases in inflation region-wide. The report also focuses on conflict-ridden countries such as Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, and Somalia (Center for Arab Unity Studies, April 2008).
- The April issue of [al-Siyasa al-dawliya](#) (*Foreign Policy*) published by al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies includes articles on the financial crisis in the international economy, the Gaza crisis, and a special report on

the Arab-Israeli conflict.

- The April issue of *Ara'* (*Opinions*) magazine, published by the Dubai based Gulf Research Center, discusses women's representation in legislative councils in Gulf countries, in addition to a special report on the future of energy in the Gulf region.

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[Return to table of contents.](#)

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