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Party-building in the Middle East

After 16 years working in the field of democracy promotion, 14 of those leading the Middle East and north Africa division of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), it has been my experience that the citizens of the Arab world prefer to be able to choose their leaders, believe that democracy is the best way to order their societies, and demonstrate a desire to participate in the governance of their communities and nations. Unfortunately, Arab regimes are, at best, wary of ceding real authority to processes or institutions that would empower voters, and in some cases actively suppress indigenous attempts to diffuse authority. Outside providers of democracy assistance can, with the cooperation of local partners and the acquiescence of regimes, play a modest but significant role in helping people claim the right to choose leaders and demand that governments be responsive to their citizens.

In this article, I will enumerate some of the key achievements of democracy assistance in the Arab world over the past decade; describe the strategies democracy assistance practitioners employ in their work; and explain, through four case studies and the voices of recipients, how specific

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interventions have contributed to the advancement of democracy in the Middle East and north Africa.¹

The people of the Middle East are acutely aware of what the United Nations development program has termed a “democratic deficit,” and the pursuit of democratic norms and freedoms are increasingly part of public demands.² Even where democratic practice is scarce, the language of debate is changing and meaningful progress is being made.

For example, a national women’s list for parliament in Morocco in 2002 saw 35 women take office.³ That success had repercussions around the region: it led to the election of six women through a quota in Jordan, the guarantee of seats for women in Iraq’s council of representatives, the election of women in Bahrain and Qatar, and the right to vote for women in Kuwait. Spurred by these achievements, women activists in Saudi Arabia are increasingly assertive—demanding the right to drive, for example—and forming advocacy networks, including the Saudi Women’s Action Network, formed recently with the National Democratic Institute’s assistance.

In addition, Islamist parties in Morocco, Bahrain, and Yemen have become more pragmatic and participate peacefully in the political system; newspapers in Algeria have written about and sponsored forums to discuss corruption and nepotism in government; Yemen has formed a public anticorruption commission crystallizing demands for more transparency; thousands of Facebook activists and bloggers in Egypt, Tunisia, and throughout the region are calling for government reform; and a number of Arab networks for democracy have been formed and are using coordinated action for more effective advocacy.

1 For the purposes of this article, I am going to use the term “democracy assistance” rather than “democracy promotion.” The word “assistance” is part of the preferred lexicon of democracy practitioners as it connotes an activity in support of an indigenous effort, based on shared values, rather than the selling an idea or concept that needs “promotion.”

2 The United Nations development program cites three major deficits facing the Arab world: freedom, women’s empowerment, and knowledge relative to income. See “Arab human development report 2002: Creating opportunities for future generations,” 2002.

3 Thirty of the women MPs were elected through a women’s-only national list, while five were elected directly. See Nicolas Pelham, “Arab women demand quotas,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 November 2002.

Despite considerable evidence of indigenous Arab demand for change, democracy practitioners are cognizant that their vocation is viewed with suspicion and skepticism by some. Democracy assistance strategy is carefully formulated to reinforce local initiatives, and it has evolved over time. Active in the Arab world since 1993, the National Democratic Institute's early activities were modest and consisted of assessing the outlook for democratic progress in selected countries, building the capacity of local organizations, and waiting for an opportunity—sometimes provided by elections or leadership changes—to work with local partners to expand openings. It was possible to establish “beachheads” by opening small offices in a number of countries in the region, including Morocco, Algeria, the West Bank and Gaza, Bahrain, and Yemen. The maintenance of small offices with knowledgeable staff with the appropriate language skills allowed the institute to expand its network of local partners and contacts and to increase its understanding of the local political landscape.

Support for democracy assistance and demand from local activists started to increase around 1999, paradoxically, as the Palestinian-Israeli peace process broke down and terrorist bombings, such as the attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen and the embassy bombings in Africa, highlighted instability in the region and demonstrated the need for better governance. Stability as a foreign policy objective no longer looked as attractive when it became clear that entrenched authoritarian leaders were, in some instances, masking deep dissatisfaction and conflict that had dramatic spillovers in the region and internationally.

The September 11 attacks began a new era of world attention focused on the region. Funding for democracy assistance increased and democracy strategies changed from low-key, small-change initiatives to large, top-down, institutional reform efforts. Governments in the region reacted to the new push for democracy by holding elections, reforming parliaments, revising constitutions, and expanding freedom for women. The Iraq war, for a short time, encouraged more democratic change as countries—Egypt, for example—moved to reduce authoritarian control, or at least tried to create the illusion that they were responding to Washington's democracy focus. For the National Democratic Institute and other democracy organizations, it was relatively easy to expand programs and work cooperatively, even in authoritarian countries. While there were many successes in this period,

there was also an effect, dubbed “liberalized autocracy” by the scholar Daniel Brumberg, that hampered true political reform.⁴

By mid-2006, the Iraq War was seen to be failing, President George W. Bush’s popularity was dropping, and governments postponed democracy efforts, slowing reforms and penalizing democracy activists. The jailing of Ayman Nour in Egypt is one example of this trend, but democratic progress in Bahrain, Algeria, and Yemen slowed dramatically as well. Democracy organizations reacted by adopting a strategy of supporting existing grassroots efforts and trying to consolidate initiatives begun earlier in the decade. Democracy activities became bottom-up rather than top-down, with activities motivated by a cadre of willing and courageous activists. While there was significant pushback, the National Democratic Institute was able to support a plethora of indigenous efforts, even while losing the cooperation of many regimes in the region.

Operating in this environment has required creativity and subtlety. Perhaps the best way to understand the work of democracy practitioners is to examine case studies of how democracy assistance has helped further indigenous aspirations. While the democracy field is broad and can include activities related to rule of law, civil society development, conflict resolution, and media freedom, the case studies in this article involve three types of programs: political party development and coalition building, women’s political participation, and domestic election monitoring.⁵

YEMEN: POLITICAL PACTS AMONG NONTRADITIONAL PARTY PARTNERS

Significant democratic reforms were implemented after the reunification of North and South Yemen in 1990, and Yemen’s first parliamentary election in 1993—which featured women voting and running for office—was considered a breakthrough on the Arabian peninsula. Soon thereafter, political tensions—many arising from the insufficient integration of the political leaders from the former South Yemen into government structures—increased, and the Yemeni Socialist party, previously the dominant party in the south, decided to boycott the 1997 parliamentary polls.

4 Daniel Brumberg, “Liberalization versus democracy? Understanding Arab political reform,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2003.

5 Domestic election monitoring, driven by local organizations and volunteers, examines the entire electoral process, including technical election administration, candidate selection, media fairness, election day conduct, and adjudication of complaints.

Islah, Yemen's principal Islamist party, initially cooperated with President Ali Abdullah Saleh's northern-dominated General People's Congress, but by 2001 Islah had withdrawn from government and became an opposition party. The country appeared to be on a path to complete single party rule.

It was against this backdrop that the National Democratic Institute provided key assistance and advice that convinced the Socialist party to remain within the political process and encouraged the formation of a tactical party coalition—the gathering of six opposition parties, led by Islah, which calls itself the Joint Meeting Parties.

The Joint Meeting Parties was formed in 2002 to advocate for political reform and to increase opposition leverage within the supreme council for elections and referenda. While it was an uneasy coalition in its first years, deputy secretary of Islah, Abdul Wahab Al Anisi explained that “[w]e subordinated our ideological agendas to the one we had in common, which was a realization that political reform was a necessity if we were to save democracy in Yemen and stop the country's descent into endemic corruption.”⁶

The Joint Meeting Parties had its origins in an unlikely venue—the Democratic party national convention in Los Angeles in August 2000. The National Democratic Institute organizes a bipartisan program of seminars and workshops, called the international leaders forum, at each Democratic convention, and invitees in 2000 included Yemeni Socialist party Secretary General Jarallah Omar and Islah Secretary General Mohammed al Yadoumi. Between attending seminars on political party organization and US politics and observing sessions of the convention, Omar and Yadoumi discussed a gambit that most observers of Arab politics would have thought impossible—a tactical alliance between the avowedly secular Socialist party and the Muslim Brotherhood-connected Islah.

The conversations continued when Omar and Yadoumi returned to Yemen. Rumours of a possible coalition were spreading, but it was when Omar was invited to give a keynote address to Islah's biannual convention in December 2002 that the public realized that Islah and the Socialist party were cooperating and had made common cause on the desirability of political reform. Tragically, Omar, a visionary Yemeni leader, was shot and

6 Mona Yacoubian, “Building momentum for reform: The Islamist-secular alliance in Yemen,” United States Institute of Peace, November 2007, 59-64.

killed by the 26-year-old Ali Ahmed Jarallah, reputed to be a member of Islah's radical wing, aligned with the cleric Abd Al Majid Al Zindani, as he left the podium.

That the Yemeni Socialist party, which had faded as a political force after it boycotted the 1997 election, was able to negotiate a favourable coalition arrangement with the much stronger Islah, was itself linked to an earlier democracy assistance intervention. In March 1999, NDI invited reform-minded leaders of the Socialist party to Morocco to meet with representatives of political parties participating in Morocco's socialist-led coalition government. The then-prime minister of Morocco, Abdurahman Yousouffi, of the Union of Socialist Forces, had been persecuted and jailed but had gone on to become one of the few former opposition leaders to achieve political power in a Arab country. NDI's goal was to expose the Yemeni politicians to the experience, practices, and successes of Morocco's *Koutla* (Arabic for "bloc") coalition. The participants examined four themes: coalition building, grassroots outreach, internal party democracy, and election organization. Accounts from the Socialist party leaders suggest that the Morocco study mission helped convince the party to form a coalition and, through it, to contest the 2003 elections.

From a technical vantage point, Yemen's 2003 elections were an improvement over 1997 because of increased voter turnout, with women's participation rising to 41 percent of the votes cast on election day. The Joint Meeting Parties were disappointed with the political results, though, as Islah's seat total fell from 64 to 45, and the Yemeni Socialist party won a total of seven seats. The ruling General People's Congress controlled 79 percent of parliamentary seats after 2003, and the combined opposition 20 percent.

The two prominent post-2003 critiques of Yemen's supreme council were that it had conducted a flawed registration process, allowing thousands of under-aged citizens to attain voter cards, and that its inner workings were biased toward the ruling party. After a series of interparty dialogues facilitated by NDI and others from the democracy assistance community in Yemen, an agreement was signed by the Congress and the Joint Parties, endorsed by the government, which addressed the overly partisan staffing of local election bodies and problems in voter registration. Following the signing of the so-called "June 18 agreement," two opposition party members were also added to the supreme council, increasing the total number of commissioners from seven to nine. The changes, while modest, satisfied the Joint Parties, and the coalition decided to field a joint candidate in the 2006 presidential election.

While Yemen's subsequent September 2006 presidential and local elections once again had flaws—some election-day violence, a supreme council bias toward the ruling party, and a flawed voter registration process—the elections were a significant achievement for a country known more for tribal conflict and exotic scenery than democratic political processes.

The consensus Joint Meeting Parties presidential candidate, Faisal bin Shamlan, a man universally respected as honest and competent, provided a true political alternative to incumbent President Saleh. Unlike most Arab elections, Yemen's government-controlled media allowed significant coverage of bin Shamlan's campaign, and state television provided free access for political spots and up to 10 minutes of news coverage of opposition events every evening. Women voted and ran in record numbers, and, in positive contrast to its Gulf neighbours, which have not elected a single woman in a contested seat, 28 women, out of 122 nominated by their parties, won municipal seats in Yemen.⁷

In the end, bin Shamlan and the Joint Parties received just under 25 percent of the vote. While disappointing to the party members who put so much effort into the election process, the Joint Parties, despite the formidable advantages of the ruling party, provided a genuine choice to Yemen's voters. By banding together and putting forward a credible presidential candidate, the opposition parties pressed their agenda on accountability and corruption, and, in the process, helped change expectations for governance in Yemen.

The type of debate engendered by the 2006 election was promising, but President Saleh has proven to be an erratic liberalizer; most analysts agree that Yemen has experienced considerable political backsliding in 2008. The 2009 parliamentary elections were postponed in the face of opposition protests about pre-election preparations. The Joint Meeting Parties have rejected early attempts by the supreme council to register new voters and most opposition politicians have questioned the composition of the election body. Freedom of the press has diminished, and arbitrary detention has increased as the government seeks to quell the Houthi rebellion in the north and unrest in the always-restive south. Yemen is far from a democracy, but despite all of its difficulties, the country has managed to be a pioneer in certain democratic reforms and hope persists that progress will continue.

7 "Yemen: 2006 elections—observation of voter registration and September presidential and local elections," National Democratic Institute, November 2006.

MOROCCO: A DRAMATIC RISE IN THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

The effort to increase women's political representation in Morocco experienced its first glimmer of hope when the country's 1997 parliamentary election led to Morocco's first government of "alternance," whereby the leader of the traditional opposition, Abdurahman Yousouffi of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces, was chosen as prime minister after his party won a plurality of seats.⁸ Many Moroccans and outside observers were disappointed, though, when only two women were elected, then the lowest percentage of elected women compared to other Arab states.

Moroccan women activists, led by the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women, set out to change the status of women in political life radically by focusing on the elections scheduled for 2002. The association approached NDI for help, and together the organizations developed a plan to increase women's representation in the legislature.

Initially, the association planned to lobby the government for election law changes that would have mandated the election of a certain number of women—a quota. While the quota strategy had some support and was feasible within Morocco's proportional representation system, the Moroccan activists quickly ran into opposition from the political parties, who were fearful of losing support and seats, and from conservative forces that were not supportive of women's rights. NDI and its partner organizations decided to approach party leaders directly to convince them that the integration of women could build a larger voter base and help them win more seats. NDI also offered to cosponsor training activities in conjunction with the association to increase women's political profile and to identify and groom likely candidates for 2002.

NDI enlisted the help of the Seattle-based Center for Women and Democracy, which included, among others, Cathy Allen, a political consultant specializing in women's candidacies; Christine Gregoire, now Washington State's governor; and British Columbia legislative assembly member Sue Hammel. The team arranged a series of meetings with the (all male) leaders of Morocco's political parties. Making a strong case for women's candidacies, the party leaders were told that if they did not make room for women in their parties voluntarily, the government might pass a law mandating seats for women or other parties might act first, gaining some electoral advantage.

⁸ For more on Hassan II's appointment of Youssefi, see Haim Malka and Jon Alterman, "Arab reform and foreign aid: Lessons from Morocco," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 2006, 7.

At the same time, the Association of Moroccan Women and other women's organizations, with NDI's assistance, organized a series of campaign training schools for Moroccan women that ultimately trained 200 participants. Over the course of two years and multiple seminars and training sessions, 100 potential candidates were drawn from the larger group and received more intensive training and advice. Most of the women had never met one another, and few had prior political experience. Topics covered in the training included public speaking, message development, political strategy, and the use of public opinion research and voter outreach techniques. The North American experts and trainers did not just participate in seminars; they "adopted" the most promising of the potential candidates and provided ongoing advice by phone and email, returning to Morocco a number of times to provide further training and mentoring. The relationships developed in 2001-02 persist to this day.

Realizing that public support for women in politics was lukewarm, Moroccan organizations, with NDI's assistance, also initiated a public outreach campaign, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Interior, that included billboards in 10 Moroccan cities, television and radio advertisements, and thousands of brochures and newspaper inserts.

Ultimately, the party leaders decided that they were better off voluntarily including women as candidates than to have a law imposed. They agreed, after much pressure was brought to bear by Moroccan activists, to adopt a voluntary quota that would see 30 women elected from a national list devoted to women. The parties also agreed to put women higher on the district level lists and to use party resources to promote women's candidacies. The result, which exceeded everyone's expectations, was that 35 women were elected in 2002—a huge increase that vaulted Morocco to the top of the Arab world in women's political participation. Morocco's success led to similar initiatives to boost political representation for women in Jordan and Iraq years later.

NDI trained one third of the women who were ultimately elected and, perhaps more importantly, provided the encouragement needed to convince Moroccan women that they had outside support and that their fight had broader implications for women in the region. Once elected, the women representatives proved themselves to be quite effective, arguing persuasively, for example, on reforms in 2004 to the family status code (*moudawana*) establishing women's equal status in the family. Milouda Hazeb, one of the Moroccan members of parliament elected in 2002 and the former secretary general of her party, remarked that she would never have entered politics without the outside support she received. She appreciated the specialized

training she received, but more importantly, Hazeb said, she became a part of something bigger than herself or her country—a worldwide movement of women entering politics to improve the lives of others.

PALESTINIAN POLITICAL PARTY REFORM

The National Democratic Institute has been implementing programs in the West Bank and Gaza since 1994. It began with the launch of a grassroots civic education program that later became an independent Palestinian-run NGO called Civic Forum. In the 14 years since, NDI has worked extensively with nationalist/secular political parties and civil society organizations on programs addressing issues of the political participation of women, the promotion of political pluralism, and the strengthening of local government. NDI has also conducted domestic and international election observation missions, sponsored survey research and focus groups, and organized training on political party development and election campaign management, assessments of voter registration, and legal workshops for legislative council members.

Following the 20 January 2006 Palestinian legislative council election, NDI conducted extensive consultations with Palestinian parties to assess the reasons for their losses. Fatah, the largest and most significant of these parties, experienced extreme internal pressure to account for its loss of power, with demands to hold internal party elections to replace the aging leadership.

The assessment showed that all parties shared a past as resistance movements, but they had not adopted the structure of modern political parties and had neither the discipline nor the organizational capacity to compete effectively. Consisting of a leadership that was elected during its years in exile, Fatah's internal organizational structure is very decentralized. Likewise, other members of the Palestine Liberation Organization—the Palestinian Democratic Union, the Popular Struggle Front, and the Palestinian People's Party—are afflicted with the problems of an aging leadership and with little capacity for growth in an increasingly polarized political environment.

NDI recommended that the parties take several steps to restore their legitimacy with the Palestinian public, improve future electoral prospects, and avoid becoming further marginalized. Party membership lists had been virtually nonexistent or poorly organized, thus depriving the parties of an asset that could be used effectively in conducting election campaigns. NDI worked with Fatah to help organize membership files digitally, issue identification

badges, and develop a computer network connecting 20 field offices with the central database. The work has resulted in the entry of 200,000 names of active members in the West Bank and an exponential increase in the party's organizational capacity. Although Fatah has a decentralized command structure, it has retained a top-heavy central leadership—a central committee of 21 members and a revolutionary council of 130 members, of which only 14 are from the West Bank and Gaza. Consequently, it has not had a tradition of being grassroots-driven or accountable, and disenfranchised constituents offer the most vocal criticisms of Fatah's leadership. NDI assistance has included advice on building and reinvigorating local organizations, improving internal communications, developing member outreach strategies, engaging rank-and-file membership, and creating opportunities for women's participation in party governance.

NDI has also focused on organizational development and internal party reform with three smaller parties on the democratic left—the Palestinian Democratic Union, the Palestinian People's Party, and the Popular Struggle Front. Conducting workshops on membership outreach and strategic communications, NDI has introduced a "training of trainers" program to transfer many of these capacities to locally engaged instructors so as to ensure that programs become self-sustainable. The program has been designed with the expectation that political parties that are professionally organized, voter-supported, recognize the sovereignty of the electorate, and base their platforms on the needs of their voting publics will earn the legitimacy required to negotiate, govern, and manage the difficult tasks of nation-building and public administration.

NDI's activities in the West Bank and Gaza can be correctly described as "technical assistance," and such collaborative efforts have already led to significant political reforms that could have positive long-term ramifications if the democratic process is again allowed to move forward. The organization of membership records into a registration database has enabled Fatah to conduct a series of internal organizational elections. Dozens of elections have added new faces to the movement's branch, district, and regional secretariats, reaching down into the villages and neighbourhoods of the West Bank and Gaza. This achievement underscores the recognition that renewal is the *sine qua non* of the continued relevance of Fatah to a future Palestinian state. The internal elections also eliminated a major stated impediment to the holding of the movement's sixth congress, and thus the election of a new leadership.

EGYPTIAN DOMESTIC ELECTION OBSERVATION

Democracy assistance in Egypt, most of it administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has often been criticized for responding too closely to the priorities and imperatives of the Egyptian government—priorities that are seldom democratic in nature. As dictated by a bilateral agreement negotiated between the two governments, the Egyptian authorities wield an effective veto over any USAID-funded project because the goals of any development initiative must be agreed upon by both sides. Over the years, the Egyptian government has used its approval power to limit or stop USAID assistance to Egyptian NGOs whose activities it deemed questionable—a judgment extended to the activities of most human rights and democracy groups in the country.

In 2005, under pressure from the Bush administration and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the US government negotiated a separate agreement with Egypt that allowed certain types of groups and activities to be funded directly, without prior approval by Egypt. Among these activities was a domestic election monitoring effort undertaken by three coalitions of Egyptian NGOs—the Independent Committee for Election Monitoring, the National Campaign for the Monitoring of Elections, and the Egyptian Association for Supporting Democratic Development.⁹

The first direct grants to these organizations, in the total amount of only US\$1 million, were of enormous significance in the history of democracy in Egypt.¹⁰ Administration officials like Rice vigorously promoted the democracy agenda, and Egypt wanted to be seen to be reacting positively to democracy initiatives and allowed direct grants for election monitoring to proceed. The activities of Egyptian election monitors, by exposing election manipulation and proving low turnout figures, may have changed Egyptian politics in the long term.

NDI had long established working relationships with a number of Egyptian NGOs and “civil companies”—nonprofit entities established to skirt Egypt’s restrictive NGO law. Previous activities had included inviting Egyptian activists to join election observation activities in other countries. In

9 “MPs voiced their criticisms following a decision by the American Embassy in Cairo to allocate \$1 million to NGOs intending to monitor this year’s presidential and parliamentary elections.” See “Opposition snipes at government,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 31 March–6 April 2005.

10 Tamara Cofman Wittes, “The 2005 Egyptian elections: How free? How important?” Brookings-Saban Center, 24 August 2005.

May 2005, NDI received a request from several Egyptian NGOs to provide election monitoring training, as they had received direct grants from USAID or the Middle East Partnership Initiative to monitor the presidential election, but lacked direct experience in election observation. NDI worked mainly with two coalitions, the Independent Egyptian Committee for Monitoring Elections, led by the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, and the National Campaign for Monitoring the Election 2005, led by the United Group. NDI also provided ongoing assistance to NGOs monitoring alone or as part of a third coalition, the Civil Society Election Monitoring Coalition, led by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights.

With only three months to prepare for the September polls, NDI launched an intense series of consultations and trainings for its partners on international principles and standards of election monitoring, observing the campaign period, media analysis, monitoring election day, training of trainers, and principles for election reporting. Ten formal training sessions were conducted, along with almost daily consultations during this three-month period. For the NGO directors and coordinators, NDI also provided advice on designing communications plans and project timelines. Although the right to monitor elections was neither explicitly guaranteed nor denied according to Egyptian law, the monitoring organizations launched civil suits on the matter, and, on the morning of the presidential election, the presidential election commission announced that civil society groups would be allowed in polling places, setting a new precedent in Egypt.

Despite the commission's decision, the majority of election monitors were barred from polling stations. It is unclear whether the decision was communicated to all polling centre officials once it was taken. Despite the confusion, thousands of monitors were reported to be in the field on election day and the government was compelled to announce a more realistic official voter turnout rate of 23 percent, as opposed to the usual over-90 percent.¹¹

Following the presidential election, NDI invited the 37 NGOs that took part in monitoring the election for an assessment and evaluation session to determine best practices for participating in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Immediately after the evaluation session, NDI

11 Sources vary on the exact percentage of voter turnout. See "Rights group sees less fraud in Egypt vote," *Asharq al-Awsat*, 11 September 2005; "Egyptians vote in rare contested elections," CBS-AP, 9 November 2005; and Jeremy Sharp, "Egypt: 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections," Congressional Research Service report, 15 January 2006.

resumed consultations with its partners, who were preparing to monitor the November parliamentary elections, which would take place over a period of six weeks. The institute launched a “counterpart program,” bringing three election-monitoring experts from Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia to Egypt. They deployed to different geographical areas to provide technical support to their Egyptian peers. Counterparts provided timely advice to Egyptian field coordinators, feedback to the trainers to improve their training skills, and accurate updates to NDI on election day.

During the parliamentary election period, NDI’s partner organizations fielded 5500 monitors. With NDI’s help, the organizations released timely press statements and reports in both Arabic and English, many of which received regional and internal press coverage. It was those reports that provided the first systematic reporting of voter participation figures, again forcing the government to make a drastic downward revision, and, by accurate reporting of flagrant election violations, calling into question the legitimacy of the election process.

The single act of funding and training domestic monitors had undermined one of official Egypt’s longest-standing fictions—that the people of Egypt were, by and large, happy with their leaders and their policies, as evidenced by large turnouts for referendums on Mubarek’s rule.¹² The act of pulling back that curtain may have contributed to a number of phenomena in Egypt, positive and negative: government repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and Ayman Nour and his party, El Ghad; social network advocacy campaigns; increased labour activism; and limited ruling party reform. While democracy assistance was only one modest factor, dissatisfaction with the status quo in Egypt and the changing nature of public debate will have a lasting impact.

While the impact of democracy assistance in the Middle East and north Africa has not been revolutionary, there is no question that the programs described in this article, along with hundreds of other initiatives driven by local activists and supported by the international community, have combined to change the public debate for the better in the Arab world. Previously taboo subjects, such as succession in the Gulf and in Egypt, are widely discussed and, while violent forces still exist, democrats have formed their own networks to combat radicals with pragmatic proposals and participation in the political realm. In some cases, there have tangible improvements in

12 “Egypt: Quarterly report,” National Democratic Institute, October-December, 2005.

governance, and expansions in citizen participation in public life will have a lasting positive impact. At the same time, political reform in the Arab region must be approached sensitively and with an emphasis on local initiative. As the Middle East policy of western governments evolves, it is important that they not abandon efforts to support the people of the Middle East and north Africa in their aspiration to gain more control over the decisions that affect their lives.

APPENDIX: TESTIMONIALS

Yassin Noman, secretary general of the Yemeni Socialist Party

The establishment of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties in 2001, with technical support from the National Democratic Institute and other international organizations, was an important moment in Yemen's political life.

The existence of such a coalition would have been inconceivable 20 years ago. At that time, Yemen's political parties were based on secret cells that formed alliances and acted covertly. Parties held to conflicting ideologies, meaning that mutual understanding and cooperation were impossible. Far from coexisting, they clashed with each other to the point of bloody confrontation.

The merging of South and North Yemen between 1990 and 1993 offered a window of opportunity for political pluralism. The balance of power during this time allowed political actors to engage in constructive dialogue. In 1993, the most transparent elections in Yemen's history were held, allowing Yemenis to express their aspirations to develop a pluralistic democracy and work toward a peaceful transition of power.

The 1994 civil war disrupted this democratic start. Postwar, the ruling elite became concerned with democracy mainly as a means of pleasing the international community and gaining international recognition for the outcome of the war. The first general elections after the war tested the government's credibility. The ruling General People's Congress attempted to gain control of parliament through unfair, non-transparent elections, and used state resources—including public funds, the civil service, and the government apparatus—to its own advantage. The 1997 parliamentary

elections convinced many Yemenis—including the Islamist Congregation for Reform (Islah), which until that time was allied with the ruling party—that the margin for democracy had decreased.

Post-elections, Islah joined the coordination council of the opposition parties. Dialogue among these parties about protecting democracy grew to include countering the General People's Congress's attempt to reverse democratic gains. Through political dialogue and in response to the actions of the ruling party, the parties quickly discovered a common interest to level the playing field by challenging the government's efforts to subvert democratic governance. This common ground made it possible and beneficial for them to form a sustainable political grouping. After having guaranteed a measure of freedom, transparency, fairness, neutrality of public funds, and neutrality of government institutions and agencies, the parties would then resume democratic competition according to their programs.

To achieve this goal, they expanded their political and ideological dialogue to include economic and social issues, and coordinated their political positions, until the Joint Meeting Parties was established as a bloc in 2001. The bloc comprises six parties: Islah, the Yemeni Socialist Party, the **Nasserite Unionist** People's Organization, the Popular Forces Union, Al-Haq Party, and the National Baath Party.

The parties were initially hesitant in their collective operation. Despite an urgent need to shift to an organizational formula governed by bylaws and an operating program, they did not establish such mechanisms for a few years, which led many to view the bloc as a temporary, tactical move not destined for success.

In 2005, however, the parties produced two vital documents—a set of bylaws and the comprehensive national reform program. The program sets forth the parties' general goals to address the country's political, economic, and social problems. The bylaws regulate the bloc's internal organization, establishing a high council of senior leadership and an executive board, composed of the heads of each party's political bureaus, to handle daily management tasks. The chairmanship of both these bodies rotates among the secretaries-general and the political bureaus' leadership every six months and has adopted clear goals. First, the Joint Meeting Parties do not seek to become a single party. This allows the parties flexibility to deal with ideological issues unrelated to the goals of the coalition and to determine their own internal organization and activities, and the education, training, and qualifications of their own members. Second, the parties maintain a dialogue in response to new political developments, a prevailing spirit of

cooperation, and a recognition of the need for a collective effort to challenge the ruling party's control of government institutions.

This unity was tested in the 2006 presidential elections, when the Joint Meeting Parties decided to field a candidate to run against President Ali Abdallah Salih, who had held power for over 28 years. The parties sought to break the barrier of fear of running against a president who had ruled the country for so long and, thereby, transform the presidential elections into a competitive process rather than a meaningless formality.

For daring to compete, the parties were exposed to a broad attack, including threats, by the government. They succeeded in surviving these attacks and expanded their ranks when the Arab Socialist Baath Party joined in 2008. The parties have also established relationships with other parties and social activists.

The experiment of the Joint Meeting Parties is important because it has introduced the conditions for a successful democratic enterprise in Yemen and has shown that despite long experience with exclusion and violence, it is possible to establish dialogue, democratic competition, and the procedures for a peaceful exchange of power.

Milouda Hazeb, a member of the political bureau of the Party of Authenticity and Modernity and a parliamentary consultant in the Kingdom of Morocco. She was a member of the Moroccan house of representatives from 2002 to 2007

The past decade witnessed several positive changes related to women and their role in Moroccan society. Moroccan women represent nearly 56 percent of the student body and nearly 68 percent of medical and pharmaceutical schools; the average age of marriage among women rose from 23 years in 1997 to 27 years in 2006; 250,000 Moroccan women live alone in cities; and 144,000 women work as state employees. The fertility rate has fallen from five to less than three children per woman, on average. Despite these gains, only 40 percent of active women have a paying job and 57 percent of them work in the textile sector.

Much of this progress can be attributed to women's civil society organizations and the activism of some political parties. These groups have advocated for full and complete citizenship rights for women and, in 2006, the principle of equality among the sexes was introduced in a legal framework in the form of the family code, *moudawana*. Recently, the palace and state authorities committed to removing Morocco's reservations to the

convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. This potential milestone can be accredited to the efforts of civil society groups and political organizations. These groups lobbied parliamentary decision-makers, including women, who comprise 11 percent of the house of representatives as a result of electoral changes in 2002.

It is a tangible fact that Moroccan women's efforts were amplified by bilateral and multilateral assistance programs, which have supported the activities undertaken by the National Democratic Institute in conjunction with Moroccan women's organizations. In its most concrete form, the benefit of international assistance took the shape of study missions to foreign countries and participation in national and international forums. The provision of technical assistance and trainings helped reinforce our understanding of how to draft laws, organize the public to promote civic and political rights, and create strategies to increase the representation of women in national and local elected bodies.

There are still genuine opportunities to reduce the gap between men and women in politics. Communal council elections on 12 June 2009 saw an unprecedented number of women take office at the local level. More than 3400 women were elected, representing more than a 12-percent increase from the previous election, when women held only 0.56 percent of seats. Such an increase is in large part due to a 12-percent quota for women candidates introduced by the government in October 2008, as well as the advocacy efforts of a number of women's organizations in the country. These newly elected women councillors now have better access to a level of decision-making that directly affects their lives and those of their families. Furthermore, the parliament recently adopted a series of laws that grant women significant advantages—reserved candidate lists, quotas of representation in elected councils, and financial support. This should translate into a stronger presence of women in the implementation of the arrangements enclosed in the convention agreement, which Morocco is currently preparing to ratify.

Ayat M-Abulfuttouh, the former director of the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies

International assistance to domestic organizations in Egypt has taken many forms, and the regime has sometimes used outside assistance as a tool to undermine opposition political forces and to keep them weak, fragmented, and unable to develop a constituency.

Egyptian civil society is shackled by laws that constrain the formation of nongovernmental organizations and limit their activities. NGOs lack professionalism and private sector support is scarce because individuals and businesses are reluctant to jeopardize their own interests by supporting institutions that might criticize the regime they are working under. These constraints, especially the economic obstacles, mean that civil society organizations often compete for “glory” and funding but lack a genuine voluntary spirit and are less effective than they should be.

Even within this difficult context there arose, prior to 2005 elections, the idea that international assistance could support a broad coalition of Egyptian civil society institutions, represented by one member that would deal with foreign partners to monitor preparations for, and the process of, presidential and parliamentary elections. While the advantages of such an arrangement—the international legitimacy, the solidarity with sympathetic outside groups, the ripple effect within Egypt—were numerous, there were also tremendous disadvantages and threats to those receiving outside assistance. The law prohibits NGOs from receiving funds without government permission and there was uncertainty about whether domestic election monitoring was legal or would be tolerated.

Ultimately, Egyptian authorities allowed domestic NGOs to undertake monitoring activities with outside assistance because other Arab regimes—in Algeria, Yemen, and Palestine—had invited international scrutiny of elections and Egypt did not want to be perceived as “anti-democratic,” especially when the government had gone out of its way in 2004 and 2005 to appear to be reforming. For a brief time, the government even seemed to welcome election monitoring. The media publicized reports of election violations and state security intervened in favour of democracy activists on some occasions. The government’s brief support of election monitoring came to an end, however, when the Muslim Brotherhood received better-than-expected electoral support and political reform seemed destined to strengthen the movement’s hand. Government officials started to resent the monitoring NGOs, perhaps feeling that the outside support they received

gave them too much status and influence.

No democracy theorist disputes the contention that free and fair contested elections are a necessary condition for a transition to democracy. But elections by themselves are certainly far from sufficient as the sole defining element of a democracy, which requires a whole other set of institutional guarantees, including freedom of association, freedom of speech, a constitution that respects fundamental liberties, and, most importantly, a democratically elected government bound by the terms of this constitution.

As a result, Egyptian organizations found that the main obstacle to meaningful election monitoring was not issuing and sending out election day monitoring releases but the continued lack of political freedom and the atmosphere of intimidation of the press, opposition politicians, and the public. In addition to the very brief window for action, there was a hostile environment for political engagement by either local or international NGOs, and an official ban was imposed on both local and American NGOs operating without permission. Nevertheless, international funders took a risk and chose to invest in democracy assistance by granting US\$1 million to Egyptian NGOs and US\$2 million to international organizations, including the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, to support monitoring networks and elections officials.

Despite the modest funding, the allocation itself was a symbol of the commitment to democratization and as an empowering tool to local NGOs. While some international forces chose to push the limit and give direct financial funding to local NGOs, others preferred to work with the government, and still others chose the more challenging but long-lasting path of networking, building coalitions, and capacity-building. In a perfect world, if more time, funding, and coordination had been provided, this division of roles—whether intended or not—would have succeeded in pressuring the regime to open up the system for local NGOs, reducing the intimidation they felt when soliciting external assistance for domestic democracy activities.

While Egypt witnessed the emergence of popular movements in 2005, led by new democratic civil society organizations such as Kefaya and Shayfeencom, their demands for more liberal practices were not met. There were small gains during the 2005 parliamentary election, and the

monitoring reports issued by Egyptian NGOs were a benchmark. Despite assistance provided to local movements, Egypt's regime was not seriously challenged by any domestic opposition forces and the regime was not forced to take meaningful steps toward opening the system to broader democratic participation.

Some actors argued that international assistance undermined the domestic organizations instead of helping them, and concluded that while the monitoring project succeeded, the democracy movement drew back, which in turn gave tangible reasons to the regime to intimidate local NGOs. Others, including me, would argue that local organizations are intimidated in any case, and as long as the assistance is provided without preconditions, cooperation with like-minded organizations like NDI and IRI is fine. Even though the assistance was the first of its kind in terms of scale and comprehensiveness, it increased the transparency of the election results and forced the regime to announce correct election figures. Moreover, it stood as a striking symbol of cooperation between Egyptian NGOs and international organizations in advocating for democratic values. In other words, and contrary to what some think, this assistance helped in raising the credibility of all the players—the regime, the international forces, and NGOs—because they all announced similar results. These are considered important steps on the path to democracy.

If we agree that democracy rests on two fundamental pillars—a set of values embodied in a culture and an array of certain institutions and laws that function according to these values—then we must understand that building these two pillars requires time, and thus no realistic assessment of the Egyptian case should have expected quick reforms that would have transformed Egypt into a full-fledged democracy simply because of election-monitoring assistance. It is understood also that as its strongest ally in the region, American influence over Egypt was limited but consistent. Drawing from the lessons of 2005, international assistance can play three effective roles in the near future to empower domestic forces. It can provide financial and technical assistance to local NGOs; it can support political freedoms consistently; and it can maintain neutrality so as to avoid political sensitivity or accusations of meddling and reduce concerns about intimidation with local partners.

