



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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## **“Political Reform in Egypt: Is ‘Kifaya’ Really Enough?”**

### **Panel Summary**

At a panel on May 2, 2005 at Georgetown University, three Middle East experts discussed the impact in Egypt of the “Kifaya” Movement, the proposed election law changes, and the Bush Administration’s call for democracy in the region.

Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the founder of Egypt’s Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, opened the discussion by citing several changes favorable to democrats in the regional and international environment since Sept. 11, 2001.

The elections in Palestine and Iraq were of particular consequence, Dr. Saad said, because the Egyptian media had claimed that fair and honest elections could not happen under occupation. When both countries did in fact have reasonably successful elections that were monitored by international observers, editorials in opposition newspapers asked the startling question: “Do we have to be occupied in Egypt in order to have a fair and honest election?” That call, Dr. Saad argued, was a central factor in President Mubarak’s reconsideration of his stonewalling attitude towards political reform.

Dr. Samer Shehata, Professor of Comparative Politics at Georgetown, offered an analysis of Kifaya rooted in the organization’s founding document, which calls for reform in Egypt as a means of responding to the external threat of American foreign policy in the region. But Kifaya’s reform agenda is much more ambitious than that of many other Egyptian political organizations, Dr. Shehata said. “What is interesting and significant about Kifaya,” he argued, “is that it has gone beyond the measured, moderate demands of the existing political parties, the moribund Egyptian political system, to call for sweeping and radical and systemic changes.” This call has begun to embolden other groups. “It has certainly charged the political environment and... expanded the limits of the possible,” Dr. Shehata said, “creating a kind of season of protest in Egypt which I don’t think we will be seeing the end of until at least the fall September presidential elections.”

Dr. Michael Dunn, the editor of the *Middle East Journal*, cautioned that some Middle East countries could see a backlash against democracy. He also speculated that once the neoconservatives in the current administration realize that genuine democracy may mean the election of anti-American regimes, “the American support for democratization may start to waver at some point.” “You don’t just decree democracy,” he said; “It is not something that can be imposed from above or imposed from outside.”

The three speakers agreed that Kifaya was not “enough,” and that additional forces would be necessary to spur real political change. Dr. Shehata noted that while the number of

supporters of Kifaya has been growing, and it has been carrying out larger and more sophisticated protests, it alone will not be able to carry out a Ukrainian-style “Orange Revolution.”

The speakers differed, though, on what process presents the best chances for reform. Dr. Dunn expressed hope that President Mubarak would be more amenable to change after the coming election. “This new Mubarak term could be an opportunity for some genuine change,” Dunn said, “both in the parliamentary elections and in beginning to dismantle some of the apparatus of authoritarianism, beginning with the emergency laws.”

Dr. Saad, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on external actors. “We hope that the international community will continue to be supportive and sympathetic toward the democrats in Egypt,” he said, “and hopefully the three together – domestic, regional, and international pressure – will deliver the baby we want delivered, i.e., democracy.”

The panel was co-sponsored by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS), and Americans for Informed Democracy (AID). It was moderated by Rashad Mahmood, an M.A. in Arab Studies student and co-founder of The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED).

“Political Reform in Egypt: Is ‘Kifaya’ Really Enough?” was the second event for POMED, an organization dedicated to examining the impact of U.S. policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East.