



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## “Democratization as a Source of Tension between the U.S. and Egypt”

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

One Woodrow Wilson Plaza

December 14, 2009, 12:00-1:00 PM

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars hosted a lecture by **Heba el-Koudsy** about American democracy promotion in Egypt and its effectiveness. According to the Center’s Middle East Program Director **Haleh Esfandiari**, every year the Center brings in an Arab journalist to conduct research as a resident scholar. This year’s scholar is el-Koudsy, who has over 15 years experience in Arab journalism and currently works for the Egyptian paper *al-Masry al-Youm*.

El-Koudsy began with a history of American democracy promotion in Egypt. For many years, it has been U.S. strategy to improve bilateral relations, cultivating cooperation on the Middle East peace process and on military and security issues. However, **President Bush** was the exception to the rule and created tension in the relationship by pushing for democratization, human rights, the rule of law, respect for women, and freedom of speech.

Despite this pressure, **President Mubarak** continued to work with the U.S. on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during this period, which witnessed several tumultuous events (the Second Intifada, the rise of **President Abbas**, the withdrawal from Gaza, the Hamas electoral victory, and the war in Gaza). In addition, Egypt supported the U.S. by training Iraqi police, deploying personnel to Darfur and Afghanistan, and allowing naval and airborne military transit through Egypt.

However, Mubarak completely ignored all pressure to democratize, dismissing such calls as foreign interference in Egypt’s internal affairs. During this time, Egypt imprisoned sociologist **Saad Eddin Ibrahim** and politician **Ayman Nour**. The Egyptian government seemed entirely immune to the State Department’s calls for their release. In fact, Egypt only released Nour after **President Obama**’s inauguration in order to foster better bilateral ties.

While international and American pressure was ineffective, the regime was compelled to reform as a “wave of young people who were fed up” found their voice and pressured the regime from within Egypt. They demonstrated for increased wages, freedom of thought, judicial independence, and the end of the emergency law. Importantly, dissent was also voiced from within the political establishment and Mubarak’s own National Democratic Party. In response, Mubarak relented in 2005 and asked parliament for a constitutional amendment to allow for multiparty presidential elections as well as instituting other reforms.

For her research, el-Koudsy conducted a series of interviews with American and Egyptian analysts. **Marina Ottaway** emphasized the weakness of the secular opposition and the strength of the security forces. **Graeme Bannerman** contended that Bush was right to push democratization, but used the wrong tools. Specifically, he argued public pressure stiffens Mubarak’s resolve, because any reform

would be perceived as backing down to the U.S. **Elliott Abrams** told el-Koudsy that a lack of tension between Egypt and the U.S. implies the U.S. isn't pushing for democratization hard enough.

On the other end, Egyptians either defend the current situation by denying the need for democratization, or they admit Egypt faces challenges while insisting that solutions must come from within. The speaker of the People's Assembly, **Ahmad Fathi Sorour**, told el-Koudsy that Egypt is a democracy in a way that suits its challenges. Meanwhile, **Mostafa el-Saeed** argued Egypt must enact democratic reform to grow the private sector, empower the middle class and intellectuals, and attract foreign investment. To do so, Egypt should bolster the influence of political parties.

Moving forward, **el-Koudsy called the upcoming two years, leading up to both parliamentary and presidential elections, "critical" for democratization.** Egypt is considered a natural target for democratization, with a moderate society, elites, secular rule, a historical precedent for democracy, and an intellectual tradition. But the question is whether Egyptians will fight for their rights.

El-Koudsy argued the United States should take a two-pronged approach. First, it should maintain pressure on Mubarak to reform, praising him publicly when he makes progress. At the same time, history shows that top-down pressure is relatively ineffective. Therefore, **the U.S. should also seek to support civil societies in Egypt that can clamor for bottom-up change.** Either way, the U.S. must push for limiting presidential power, setting term limits, eliminating restrictions on NGOs and political parties, cancelling the emergency law, ending torture, restoring judicial oversight of elections, increasing tolerance for minorities and women, reforming the education system, and upholding freedom of speech.

During the question and answer session, el-Koubry admitted that President Obama is currently burdened by problems within America and beyond Egypt, but insisted he must understand that these next two years pose the best chance for reform. She also spoke about the problem of ignorance and poverty. Until the Egyptian people are fed, economically secure, and educated, it is unlikely they will go the streets and struggle for democracy.

When asked about **Mohamed ElBaradei's** recent announcement that he will only run for president as an independent (nearly impossible under current law), el-Koubry explained how his potential candidacy has sparked a debate within Egypt about its political future. Before, **everyone assumed Gamal Mubarak will inherit power, but now people are increasingly aware there may be other options out there,** if only reform can take place. She also emphasized the importance of international election monitoring to ensure a free and fair outcome.

Finally, while positive conditionality in foreign assistance may be helpful, ultimately the change must come from within and from the bottom-up. Therefore, the U.S. should focus on supporting civil society.