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Fighting on Two Fronts

Secular Parties in the Arab World

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The Crisis of Secular Parties

Secular parties in the Arab world—a broad range of political organizations that vary in their political orientation from liberal positions to vaguely socialist programs—are facing a crisis. Caught between regimes that allow little legal space for free political activity on one side and popular Islamist movements that are clearly in the ascendancy throughout the Arab world on the other, they are struggling for influence and relevance, and in some cases even for survival.

Results of recent elections across the region have exposed the weaknesses of secular parties and thus created a new sense of urgency among their leaders and members. They no longer hide—from themselves or others—the depth of the crisis they are facing, but they have no ready solutions. They know that they have stagnant or even dwindling constituencies, whereas the Islamists have growing and increasingly well-organized ones. And most admit that, at present, they do not have a strategy on how to regain the ground they have lost in countries such as Morocco and Egypt or to take advantage of new opportunities in countries such as Yemen and Kuwait. There is often a plaintive tone to the arguments set forth by secular parties in the Arab world. They feel victimized by authoritarian governments that thwart their activities. They feel disadvantaged by the competition of Islamist movements that use mosques for proselytizing and charitable institutions to build constituencies. They feel, in other words, caught in the middle and fighting on two fronts.

Indeed, conditions in most Arab countries are quite difficult for secular parties, just as they are for any political organization seeking to act independently of a government or even more to challenge a government. But the crisis of secular parties is also in part of their own making. With few exceptions, they have not focused on the organizational imperative required to participate successfully in political systems that are election-based, although not truly democratic. The weakness of organization and outreach activities by secular parties has allowed constituencies that were once secular, such as industrial workers in Egypt or urban intellectuals in Morocco, to drift toward Islamist movements or to seek the protection of the government. This is not an inevitable outcome of the authoritarian or semiauthoritarian nature of the state. Islamist movements have worked assiduously for years to develop political machines in spite of systematic regime repression and exclusion. Secular parties are more inclined to take constituencies for granted and engage instead in intellectual discussions.

It is symptomatic of the problems faced by secular parties that many among them even have problems in defining their identity clearly. The term *secular parties* we have chosen to use after much discussion is not one most parties accept, fearing it implies a rejection of Islamic culture and values, which they in fact accept. Indeed, it is true that these parties are not militantly secular, à la Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, or ideologically committed to a French-style *laïcité*. They simply are not embracing a political platform inspired by religious ideals. And that is why we refer to them as secular rather than secularist.

Secular parties are quick to define what they are not—they are not anti-Islamic, they do not reject the authentic culture of their countries—but they have trouble clarifying what they are. The term *democratic* that many of them prefer is misleading because today most political groups in the region, from mainstream Islamist movements to authoritarian ruling establishments, ostensibly embrace democracy. There is in fact no clear indication that most secular parties are any more committed to democracy than other actors. *Liberal,* another term many favor, is equally confusing: does it mean liberal in the European or in the American sense? Or does it stand for the revival of the liberal tradition in Arab politics that flourished in Egypt and the Levant from the 1920s to the 1940s? And how does it apply to parties that still have the word *socialist* in their name or that not so long ago embraced Arab nationalism? The ambiguity of many secular parties has greatly diminished their ability to develop coherent programs and to fashion political messages that are distinct from those of ruling establishments and Islamists.

In fairness to secular parties, Arab societies, always conservative in their social and religious attitudes, have become increasingly more so over the last decades, thus limiting the space available for the articulation of secular ideas in politics. To some extent, the ambiguity of many secular parties represents an adaptation to a social milieu that is not receptive to political programs not inspired by religious ideals. As recent elections have shown, however, this lack of clarity has been counterproductive. It has driven away traditional constituencies without attracting new potential voters, who see very little reason to support parties that are not substantially different from ruling establishments or Islamist movements but cannot dispense either the patronage government parties control or the social services Islamist movements offer. In today's Arab politics, secular parties have become for the most part second tier actors who cannot compete successfully for voters' support. Ambiguity is not a viable strategy.

The crisis of secular parties is emerging as a major obstacle to democratic transformation in the Arab world. At a time when political debate is quite broad and active in most countries and when mass media expose

Arab citizens to a wider range of ideas than in the past, the spectrum of viable political organizations is quite narrow. More countries are holding competitive elections than before, but few real parties, and even fewer real secular parties, contest such elections.

Above all, the weakness of secular parties is leading to a curious blurring of the lines between governments and opposition, with many secular parties looking to governments for protection against the rise of Islamists, even as they try to curb the power of those governments. Secular parties in Egypt, for example, suffer at the hand of the government. Their activities are curtailed, their meetings disrupted, and their leaders sometimes arrested, but at least they know what to expect. They know what the restrictions are, and although they do not like them, they usually learn to live with them. But they do not know what to expect from potential Islamist parties. The prospect of an Islamist electoral victory is truly threatening to secular parties in these countries because it could entail not only new and less predictable political restrictions, but also the danger of new social and cultural restrictions being imposed on the country. Caught between a predictable adversary and an unpredictable one, secular parties often respond by moving closer to the incumbent government. As a result, attempts to build cross-ideological opposition fronts, including secular and Islamist organizations with the objective of better challenging the incumbent regime, rarely succeed. Such attempts are usually initiated by Islamist movements before elections but meet with only a cautious reaction by secular parties that do not trust the Islamists and prefer to safeguard their relations with the regime. The only noteworthy exception to this pattern is the Yemeni opposition front, which includes the Socialist Party and the Islamist Islah (Reform) Party.

Despite their weakness, secular parties are seen in the West as the organizations that could bring democracy to the Arab world. Western governments know well that Arab regimes are not interested in true democratic reform. They also mistrust Islamist movements, fearing their participation in elections could lead to a new wave of religion-based authoritarian regimes rather than to democracy. Although secular parties often suffer from old leadership, ossified cadres, and lack of internal democracy, they have become by default the organizations that the West counts on to promote democracy in the Arab world. Such parties are often headed by individuals who are educated in the West or at least have been exposed to the West. They talk the international language of democracy with greater fluency and more credibility than Islamist politicians, even though many of them started their careers as Arab socialists and Arab nationalists.

We also believe that strengthening secular parties is crucial to the democratic transformation of the Arab world. But our conclusion is not based on fear of Islamists, disenchantment with ruling establishments,

or admiration for the democratic commitment of secular politicians. Rather, it is based on the fact that, in the absence of viable secular parties, political competition in the Arab world is reduced to a dangerous bipolar confrontation between rulers and Islamists. A political center, crucial to the development of democracy, is either missing or remains very limited in most Arab countries at present. Secular parties in the Arab world could help change this situation, but to do so they must change themselves first.

Secular Parties in Four Countries

The analysis of secular parties that follows is based on in-depth research in four countries and on discussions with representatives of many secular parties across the region. We start with factual background about secular parties in Morocco, Egypt, Yemen, and Kuwait and proceed to a broader analysis of the uncertain future of secular parties in the Arab world.

Morocco

More than any other country in the Arab world, Morocco has a long, continuous history of political parties, including secular parties and those considered to be Islamic well before the concept of Islamist parties became common. Although Morocco was an authoritarian, repressive country from independence in 1956 until the mid-1990s, the monarchy never succumbed to the temptation of banning political parties or proclaiming a single party system. As a result of this long tradition, some Moroccan secular political parties continue to display a degree of structure and organization that is unusual in the Arab world. This does not mean that they are strong, flourishing parties at present or that they do not feel threatened by the stiff competition from Islamist parties and movements. Compared with other countries in the region, however, Moroccan secular political parties stand out as real organizations.

There are over two dozen political parties in Morocco today, and most are simply cliques gathered around a hopeful leader trying to launch a political career. The significant political organizations that can be called secular, though with even more caveats than in other countries, are significantly fewer. They are the two parties that developed during the struggle to put an end to the French protectorate, namely the Istiqlal (Independence) and the USFP (Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires, originally UNFP—Union Nationale des Forces Populaires); the so-called royalist parties; and the Berber parties, which overlap to some extent with the royalist. Calling the USFP a secular party is not problematic, given its socialist antecedents. The case of the Istiqlal is more complex, because during the independence struggle the Istiqlal was the party of

the conservative, religious element in the society, founded by a religious scholar and embodying tradition. But that was several decades before today's Islamist movements came into existence. In the contemporary political spectrum, the Istiqlal has aligned itself firmly with the USFP, not with the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD). Indeed, both parties represent the core of the so-called *kutla,* or bloc, of parties that were once in the opposition but are now aligned with the monarchy and opposed to the PJD. Apart from the Istiqlal and the USFP, there are the so-called monarchist parties and the Berber parties, which overlap to some extent with the monarchist. They are also far from being militantly secular. They appeal to a conservative, traditional element of the rural population, religious by definition, but they do not organize under the banner of political Islam. Rather they are patronage organizations, rooted in clientelism and opposed to Islamist parties—hence, we consider them "secular" for the purposes of this discussion.

The most important of the secular Moroccan parties are the Istiqlal and the USFP. Like the Islamist PJD, they are conventional political parties, with a substantial party headquarters in the capital and a network of branch offices throughout the country. Indeed, the Istiqlal prides itself with having over a thousand such offices, a number the USFP admits to be unable to match. Many of these local offices are not functioning actively, officials from both parties concede. Nevertheless, there are true structures to both organizations.

But neither party feels it can compete with the Islamists. The reaction is a drawing even closer to the monarchy, a position that risks further weakening the two parties, at least in the eyes of people dissatisfied with the status quo. The Istiqlal and the USFP have come to view themselves as "government" rather than "opposition" parties and view the PJD as an opposition party.

How the USFP and the Istiqlal turned from being the core of the opposition into government parties is a story that reveals much, both about the political ability of Morocco's monarchy and the dilemmas faced by secular parties today. The transformation started with the decision by Hassan II to make the 1997 elections competitive. He gave more political space for the old parties to organize but also allowed for the first time an Islamist movement to enter the political fray legally. Initially, Islamists took over an existing political party (Mouvement Populaire Democratique et Constitutionnel, MPDC), but soon they launched a new organization, the PJD. The USFP obtained the largest number of votes in the 1997 elections, and the king named its leader, Abdul Rahman Youssoufi, prime minister. The Istiqlal also joined the government.

The *alternance,* as this transition was called, was a historic turning point. The opposition parties had not simply been out of the government

but they had been treated as enemies, their leaders and members subject to arrest. With the *alternance,* they came in from the cold. Both parties saw the change as permanent. Not only could they not envisage returning to the status of parties at best on the margins of legitimacy and at worst persecuted as a threat, but they could not even envisage being again in the opposition. This may appear as a strange idea in established democracies, where being in or out of power is seen as a temporary situation unlikely to last through many election cycles. But in a country that has only experienced one *alternance* in half a century of independence, the idea that being a government party is permanent should not be surprising.

The USFP's and Istiqlal's insistence that they are now government parties also reflects their fear of the growing influence of the PJD and of an even more popular Islamist movement, al-'Adl wa'l-Ihsan (Justice and Charity). The USFP and the Istiqlal do not trust their capacity to compete. They are timeworn organizations, and the accomplishment that originally gave them their legitimacy and aura, their contribution to the independence struggle, is long in the past. In government, they have not achieved much. In part their successes are limited because the monarchy has laid claim to all positive political developments of the last ten years; but the parties themselves have not shown much dynamism nor have they pursued a vigorous reform agenda, as some members admit. Under the circumstances, closeness to the monarchy is a prudent policy. Indeed, the current efforts to integrate the PJD into mainstream politics are taking place at the initiative of the palace, but secular political parties and many NGOs show much greater skepticism.

As a result, the secular parties are caught in a vicious circle. They have become parties of the status quo, closely aligned with the monarchy and they do not dare go beyond what the king wants. Although they argue that parliament should be given more power and that the prerogatives of the executive should be curbed, they expect the initiative to come from the monarchy. With few accomplishments to show to the public after almost ten years in the government, they need the monarchy's protection against the rise of the Islamists. Battling on two fronts, secular parties have decided to eliminate one by siding with the monarchy.

Egypt

In contrast to Morocco, secular parties in Egypt have a long history of ruptures and discontinuity. Egypt had an elected parliament and legal parties under the monarchy between 1923 and 1952. The Free Officers' Movement, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, took power and declared the republic in 1952, banning parties and proclaiming a socialist-oriented single party system in 1954. In 1976, President Anwar al-Sadat reintroduced a degree of pluralism by legalizing a small number of opposition parties. The mul-

tiparty system expanded gradually. By 2006, it included more than twenty legal parties, most of which can be classified as secular.

Despite its growing diversity, Egypt's multiparty system suffers from two serious deficiencies. The first is the transformation of the former single party into a new hegemonic party, headed by the president. The second is the plethora of legal and political restrictions imposed by the government to limit the role of liberal and leftist opposition parties. Although Egyptian party laws ban only religious parties—a ban that will soon be enshrined in the constitution—even secular political groups encounter severe restriction when they seek to register as legal parties. Most recently in January 2007, the government-controlled Political Parties' Court rejected the demands for legalization filed by twelve groups, eleven of which have secular programs. Furthermore, even the legally registered parties are not free to organize and campaign freely. The government uses outright repression and manipulation to ensure that the opposition will get few votes in elections. Thus, secular parties do not really compete for power with the ruling party. Rather, they compete among themselves—and with Muslim Brothers running independent candidates in legislative elections—over the leftovers to achieve a small margin of representation in parliament and local councils. Egypt's multiparty system produces and sustains a weak opposition unable to challenge the authoritarian ruling establishment.

Yet, secular parties also contribute to their own weakness. Even with all its structural limitations, Egypt's political system offers some space for action and chances to compete that secular parties have not been capable of using. Indeed, a comparison between them and the banned—and severely repressed—Muslim Brotherhood quickly reveals that secular parties have not made a large investment in building up their organizations, reaching out to potential constituencies, or devising convincing electoral platforms.[1]

Secular opposition parties in Egypt are divided across the ideological spectrum into liberal and leftist organizations. When President Sadat reintroduced a limited pluralism in 1976, he deliberately promoted the formation of liberal and leftist parties, placing his own National Democratic Party in the center. There are now more than twenty opposition parties, all falling into those two categories because Islamist parties have not been allowed to register. Most of the opposition parties, however, are politically insignificant.

Only four opposition parties are currently represented in the People's Assembly—the lower house of the Egyptian parliament. Typically, two are liberal—the New Wafd (Delegation) Party and the Ghad (Tomorrow) Party—and two leftist—al-Tajamu' (Unionist) and the Arabi al-Nasri (Arab Nasserite) Party. Together, they won a meager 5 percent of

the seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections. In contrast, candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood managed to claim almost 20 percent of the seats, emerging as the strongest opposition bloc even though the organization is banned and hundreds of its members are in jail. The secular parties' performance in Egypt's first ever presidential elections, also held in 2005, was equally dismal. Al-Tajamu' and the Arab Nasserite Party boycotted the elections, but al-Wafd and al-Ghad fielded candidates. Nu'man Juma'a (al-Wafd) and Ayman Nour (al-Ghad) together convinced less than 15 percent of the electorate to vote for them. President Hosni Mubarak, in power since 1981, had no trouble getting reelected.

Different factors contribute to the weakness of secular parties in Egypt. One is their incapacity to transform their considerable historical legacy into present-day political capital. Liberals and leftists played important roles in Egyptian politics before and after 1952, respectively, but they have not built on those roles. The most striking example is offered by the New Wafd Party. The "old" Wafd was the party of the national independence movement and of secular Egyptian nationalism that advocated equal rights for the Muslim majority and the Christian Coptic minority. In the 1923–1952 liberal period, al-Wafd was the majority party and frequently formed the government sharing power with the monarchy and the British administration authorities. The Wafd's previous popularity helped the New Wafd get off to a strong start, but then it foundered. Although it appointed as its first chairman Fuaad Serag al-Din, a well-known Wafd leader before 1952, to show the continuity, it conveyed more a sense of fatigue than one of dynamic revival of an old liberal tradition. Then the New Wafd turned against its legacy of secular nationalism and forged an election alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. Later, it fashioned a party program based solely on economic liberalization. Its messages today do not resonate with broad segments of the population and are hardly distinct from the newly adopted liberal policies of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP).

Leftist parties have also found it difficult to build on their Arab nationalist legacy, particularly since the government has laid claim to much of it. Most of these parties have their origins in the Nasser period (1952–1970), which at the same time represents the high point of Egypt's influence in the Arab world and the low point of single party politics in Egypt. From 1954 to 1976, Egypt's rulers justified the single party system using different ideological mixes of socialism and Arab nationalism. Especially under Nasser and with the establishment in 1961 of the Arab Socialist Union—an organization styled after Marxist–Leninist parties in the Soviet bloc—socialism was declared the ideology of the state and Arab nationalism became its Egyptian brand, Nasserism. Policies in this period included the nationalization of major enterprises,

the imposition of strict limits on land holdings, state-led industrialization, and state-financed educational and healthcare systems.

Although a slow process of economic liberalization was undertaken by Sadat and continues to this day, the leftist heritage of the regime remains strong in some areas. Socialism remains enshrined in the constitution as the state ideology. The constitution also grants "workers and peasants" 50 percent of the seats in the parliament and local legislative councils. Public education and healthcare systems are still in place, although they are deteriorating. This allows the government to present itself as the real heir to the Nasserite legacy, and leftist opposition parties have not succeeded since their establishment in reclaiming that legacy and ideology and using it to develop their own distinctive party programs. The Egyptian government today adopts increasingly liberal policies in the economic and social sectors but continues to justify them using the inherited leftist rhetoric, making it difficult for the leftist opposition to develop a clear identity.

Decaying structures and aging leadership also undermine secular parties. Although the ruling NDP has embarked on a deliberate effort to integrate the next generation into the party under the influence of President Mubarak's son, Gamal, and the Muslim Brotherhood has made a determined effort to appeal to the conservative segments among Egypt's youth, parties such as al-Wafd and al-Tajamu' remain stagnant. And although secular parties on paper are democratically organized entities, democratic procedures are hardly respected in their inner workings. Differences over policy choices or leadership changes regularly lead to internal conflicts that weaken the parties. In the spring of 2006, al-Wafd was shaken by a confrontation between two rival factions that included several days of sporadic violent clashes at the party headquarters in Cairo. The confrontation came to an end with the expulsion of Chairman Nu'man Juma'a and the selection of his rival Mahmud Abaza as his successor. The devastating impact of this violence on the image of an opposition party that in theory advocates democracy will last for some time. Similar developments were taking place in early 2007 in the Arab Nasserite Party, when a mid-career lawyer, Sameh 'Ashur, tried to oust incumbent chairman Dia'a al-Din Dawud. The latter is over 70 years old and has been in office since the legalization of the party in 1992.

The failure to identify potential new constituencies and to bring them into the organization is the greatest weakness of the secular parties. Despite their weak performance in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2005, they continue to do very little in terms of constituency building and grassroots mobilization. Leaders and members blame their poor performance on the regime, claiming that its authoritarian measures—especially under the provisions of the Emergency Law—prevent

them from reaching out to the voters. Confronted with the ability of the Muslim Brotherhood to build stable constituencies, liberal and leftist parties frequently compare the limitations imposed on their political participation with the Islamists' allegedly unlimited access to broad segments of the population through the mosque. These arguments overlook both the extent of government repression against Islamist movements, all of which are banned, and the passivity of the secular parties themselves. They also overlook the fact that in Egypt there is still a huge number of uncommitted voters. Less than 25 percent of eligible Egyptian voters participated in the 2005 elections. A large segment of the electorate is still up for grabs in Egypt.

As liberal parties, al-Wafd and al-Ghad naturally appeal to secular intellectuals and civil society activists who fear Islamists and do not trust the ruling establishment. But they have not made a concerted effort to reach out to other potential supporters, including those segments of the business community that are not co-opted by the regime nor committed to Islamist movements. Leftist parties are probably in a more difficult position. Since Nasser rose to power in 1952, the government has co-opted the classic supporters of leftist parties, industrial workers and peasants. The government controls the national labor and peasants' unions and uses them in elections to mobilize voters for the ruling NDP. However, the continued deterioration of the living conditions of widening segments of the population and the accelerated pace of economic liberalization, which increases job insecurity, have resulted in growing discontent among workers and peasants. Al-Tajamu' and the Arab Nasserite Party have failed to penetrate the unions in any meaningful way, leaving the field open for the Muslim Brotherhood to step in and take advantage of the growing discontent.

Egyptian Copts, about 15 percent of the population, represent an additional significant constituency that secular parties have done little to mobilize. Copts, regardless of their economic and political differences, have real and understandable fears about the rise of Islamist movements. The ruling NDP has been able to exploit these fears to gain the support of Coptic voters. It has also been able to take advantage of its partial control of the official Coptic Church and has included a small number of prominent Copts, mostly university professors and wealthy businessmen, in top executive positions. Copts, however, remain underrepresented in Egyptian politics, and the majority of them have yet to become interested in elections. This situation offers a chance for both liberal and leftist parties, most of which have Coptic figures in their leadership circles, to build networks of support inside the community.

Liberal and leftist parties have weakly capitalized on the deficiencies and shortcomings of their rivals to garner popular support. Instead of

highlighting the ruling establishment's lack of commitment to true democratic reform and its failure to bridge the widening gap between rich and poor in the Egyptian society, secular parties have in general become more acquiescent to the regime, hoping to avoid outright repression. The Muslim Brotherhood sustains a great deal of ambiguity in its positions on equal political rights for Muslims and Copts as well as on issues pertaining to cultural and social freedoms. But attempts by secular parties to tap into the discontent of Copts and other population segments in the face of a rising Muslim Brotherhood have been rather unsystematic and less guided by clear constituency-building strategies. Apart from the al-Ghad, whose founder Ayman Nour is imprisoned on flimsy charges and is therefore not on good terms with the ruling establishment, secular parties in today's Egypt are a domesticated opposition that hardly challenges the regime's semiauthoritarianism. They have come to depend on the regime's consent to secure their minimal political gains and to protect the narrow political space in which they are operating.

In a country where only 25 percent of voters bother to cast their ballots, there is a vast reservoir of citizens who do not appear committed to any political party or ideology. Islamists have strategies for reaching out to more of them—through social services, the mosques, and good, old-fashioned political organizing work that would be familiar to ward captains of any traditional political party. The ruling NDP appears to have a strategy that combines promises of patronage, threats of reprisals in the form of reduced services, and a certain amount of political chicanery. Secular parties are still looking for a strategy that might work.

There has been some innovation on the part of leftist parties, namely the formation of the Kifaya (Enough) movement, but it has yielded scant results so far. Established in 2004 by leftist politicians as a broad opposition alliance, Kifaya emerged before the 2005 elections as an unconventional protest movement that came to symbolize democratic dynamism in Egypt. Loosely structured as a network of individuals and small groups rather than a traditional political party, the movement rediscovered the street as an arena of political action and fashioned a pro-democracy secular message. During the elections, it focused on mobilizing citizens against the reelection of President Mubarak and denouncing the ruling establishment's efforts to position his son, Gamal, to become his successor. Kifaya also represented an ideological innovation in the secular spectrum. It openly opposed the regime, distanced itself from established secular opposition parties, and was open to liberal and Islamist politicians alike. Organizationally, it relied on networks and focused on direct action—demonstrations and popular rallies—rather than voting. But Kifaya did not last; by the end of 2005, it had lost its effectiveness. President Mubarak, whose defeat was the common goal of all opposition

movements, had been reelected. Parties competing in the parliamentary elections were more interested in winning seats for themselves than joining forces against the regime. The public stopped paying attention to the movement's activities, and street protests and demonstrations first dwindled and then stopped. Kifaya failed in 2006 to renew its pro-democracy secular platform and degenerated into an arena of frivolous ideological conflicts among competing factions. The secular opposition's first attempt at renewal had failed.

Yemen

Multiparty politics was introduced in Yemen after unification in 1990. Until then, both the Arab Republic of Yemen (the North) and the Democratic Republic of Yemen (the South) were controlled by single parties. In the North, President Ali Abdullah Saleh established in 1982 the General People's Congress (GPC) as a governing umbrella movement with a vague socialist orientation, and the government banned political parties. In South Yemen, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), formed in 1978 and modeled after Marxist–Leninist parties in the Soviet bloc, maintained absolute power until 1990. With the proclamation of the new unified Arab Republic of Yemen, Saleh remained president and YSP Secretary General Ali Salem al-Baydh was appointed vice president. The GPC and YSP joined forces in the 1990–1993 transitional government and agreed to legalize political parties and hold competitive elections. Several new parties emerged, most notably the Yemeni Islah Party (YIP), representing the Islamist end of the spectrum, and different leftist organizations—Baathist and Nasserite—that grew out of the GPC umbrella.

The first multiparty parliamentary elections took place in 1993. The GPC finished first with 41 percent of the vote, followed by the Yemeni Islah Party and the Yemeni Socialist Party with 20.6 percent and 18.6 percent, respectively. Five Baathist and Nasserite parties together gained less than 20 percent. Although the three major parties formed a coalition government based on their representation in the Yemeni House of Representatives, unified Yemen remained unstable. A power struggle between the GPC and YSP culminated in 1994 in a brief North–South civil war, which ended with the defeat of the South and the disintegration of the YSP. Following the civil war, the North-based GPC and Islah formed a new coalition government that excluded the YSP. The YSP, however, was allowed to keep its registration and to operate as a legal opposition organization.

With the ousting of the YSP from the government, the political spectrum in Yemen has broken into three components: the ruling GPC; the Islamist Yemeni Islah Party, which joined the GPC in the government until 1997; and the secular parties of the left, which have been in the

opposition since 1994. Yemen evolved into a semiauthoritarian country with characteristics similar to those discussed in relation to Morocco and Egypt: overly strong executives with great capacity for political manipulation, weak parliaments, and limited political space for the opposition. The regime of President Saleh tolerates a degree of pluralism provided that it does not threaten the regime's hegemony over society. Various legal and political constraints are imposed on opposition parties, ensuring that they will operate on the margins of the political system. And while competitive presidential and parliamentary elections take place, the regime uses state institutions, in particular the security services, to ensure that President Saleh and the ruling GPC enjoy comfortable majorities.[2]

As in other Arab countries, secular opposition parties in Yemen are chronically weak. In the last parliamentary elections of 2003, the YSP gained less than 3 percent of the vote, down from 18.6 percent in 1993 (the party boycotted the 1997 elections). Two other leftist parties, the Unionist Nasserite People Party and the Arab Socialist Baath Party, obtained 1 and 0.7 percent, respectively. More than 10 leftist and liberal organizations did not receive enough votes to gain seats in the House of Representatives. In contrast, the Islamist Islah won 15 percent of the vote, finishing a distant second behind the ruling GPC, which obtained 79 percent of the vote. As in Morocco and Egypt, Islamists in Yemen appear better equipped to deal with the constraints imposed by a semiauthoritarian government than secular parties, which tend to degenerate into marginal actors with decaying structures.

The dramatic decline of the YSP since the 1990s was due to a mixture of obstacles the party faced after the civil war and of self-inflicted blows. The party emerged from the civil war in a weakened condition. Many of its leaders fled the country. In the North in particular, the YSP was seen by many as a separatist movement willing to risk Yemeni lives for its own political objectives. The political environment was restrictive, but the YSP was not outlawed. Instead, it was allowed to maintain its regional branches and to participate in elections. The alliance between the GPC and Islah provided the YSP with an opportunity to establish itself as the leading opposition force, an advantage not enjoyed by most secular parties that must battle the government and the Islamists simultaneously. Furthermore, the socialists also retained some popularity as a progressive force among the groups that had lost out during unification, including members of the former state bureaucracy in South Yemen, secular intellectuals, and educated women.

But instead of building on these assets to revitalize its organization and engage in grassroots mobilization, the YSP exhausted itself in endless discussions about whether it should participate in elections or boycott them. It finally decided to boycott the 1997 parliamentary elections, claiming

government fraud in voter registration. As a result, its then-secretary general, Ali Saleh Ubad, failed to obtain the endorsement of 10 percent of the members of the House of Representatives he needed to be a candidate in the 1999 presidential elections. The party also failed to renew its message to the population. It chose to stick to a victimization narrative, stressing the repression it suffered at the hand of the government, rather than nurturing the image of a viable opposition party capable of challenging the incumbent regime. Moreover, its message to the voters, unchanged from the pre-unification era of the single party system, focused on social justice and redistribution of wealth without including new issues of increasing importance to the voters, such as democracy, human rights, and women's rights.

Not until the buildup to the parliamentary elections in 2003 did the YSP embark on a serious effort to reinvent itself as an opposition party. The party fashioned a pro-democracy platform prioritizing gradual political reforms and advocated stronger coordination between secular parties and Islamists to challenge the regime. Issues such as human rights, good governance, the fight against corruption, and public service reform found their way into the party's platform. To a limited extent the YSP attracted underrepresented constituencies such as women. Although the party only won eight seats in the parliament, it managed to get back into the legislature and to reestablish its viability.

Before rejoining the parliament, the YSP was also able to take part in an attempt to build a coalition of opposition parties, overcome fragmentation, and become more effective in checking the power of the regime. Starting in 1999, several secular parties have coordinated their political activities, including presenting joint election lists for the municipal elections in 2001 through an umbrella organization, the Supreme Coordination Council of the Yemeni Opposition. The most significant development, however, took place in 2003 with the establishment of an enlarged opposition coalition that also included the Islamist Islah Party as well as some minor organizations. The Joint Meeting Parties, as the new coalition came to be known, produced a combined list of 172 candidates in Yemen's 301 districts to compete in the April 2003 parliamentary elections.

The new cross-ideological opposition alliance has substantially expanded opportunities for secular parties in Yemen. The Islah Party was more viable than the YSP, controlling 46 seats in the House of Representatives (15 percent). Most of its support came from powerful tribal and conservative constituencies, but the alliance with secular parties allowed the opposition to broaden its appeal and to become more competitive. The Joint Meeting Parties coalition was also able to field a candidate, Faisal ibn Shamlan, in the 2006 presidential elections. Although he lost to President Saleh, he obtained almost 20 percent of the vote—a signifi-

cant step forward in the Arab context where presidents usually run unopposed and stay in power for life. The Joint Meeting Parties, furthermore, continued to cooperate after the elections, announcing the formation of a shadow government and agreeing to coordinate their election lists in the parliamentary elections expected in 2009.

Like other secular parties in the Arab world, secular parties in Yemen operate in a tough environment. The sectarian and tribal nature of the social fabric limits the outreach of their messages. The recent political history of Yemen has also put constraints on some of them, especially the YSP. And the competition from the Islamists is strong. Although the obstacles faced by secular parties in Yemen are similar to those facing their counterparts elsewhere in the Arab world, their response has been highly unusual. Rather than seeking to pull closer to the regime to secure their minimal gains in the political process, they have decided to join forces with the Islamist parties. The policy has paid off by strengthening opposition forces in general. It is not yet clear whether secular parties can establish themselves as equal partners with the Islamists within the opposition.

Kuwait

A small oil monarchy in a part of the world not known for democracy, Kuwait has had an active elected parliament since its independence in 1963. This anomaly—to this day no other Gulf country has a completely elected parliament—is explained by the social and economic structure of Kuwait. Before the discovery of oil, Kuwait's main economic activity was trade across the Persian Gulf. This trade was dominated by a small number of wealthy merchant families, of which the al-Sabbah, now the ruling family, was one. Like the English barons with the British crown, the merchant families imposed on al-Sabbah the formation of an elected parliament, which they were confident they would dominate.

The ruling family had little choice but to accept this deal initially. But after the large oil price increases that followed the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, the ruling family, flush with new revenue, made a power grab and disbanded the parliament several times in the 1970s and 1980s. The parliament was only reinstated in the wake of the 1991 Gulf war, in part at the insistence of the U.S. government, which did not want to be accused of having fought a war to restore the power of the al-Sabbah family.

The parliament that reopened after the war was inevitably quite different from the original one. The country, once essentially a city-state surrounded by open country inhabited by Bedouin tribes, had urbanized. Citizenship had been extended in successive steps from the old urban core to the entire population—even now there are different classes of citizens. Economic change meant that the original big families were no

longer as central as they once were because new players were added to the mix. And, as in the rest of the Arab world, Islamist organizations had emerged as important new players, organizing systematically and reaching out to the less affluent segment of the population (poor is a relative term that does not apply well to Kuwait). This segment was composed mostly of the recently urbanized Kuwaitis, in other words, the former Bedouins.

The Islamist movements in Kuwait are not the topic of this paper. Suffice it to say that they are numerous and diverse, with Sunni and Shia groups as well as moderate and Salafi ones. The fragmentation of the Islamist spectrum could make it easier for secular politicians to compete, if they were not even less organized than is normally the case in the region.[3]

Secular politicians in Kuwait—who prefer to call themselves "liberals," a true misnomer as will be argued below—compete largely as individuals, rather than as part of political organizations or associations (political parties are banned in Kuwait). Until recently, the electoral system encouraged extreme individualism. Despite the small number of registered voters (about 140,000 before women received the right to vote in 2005), the country was divided into 25 electoral districts, with candidates only needing a plurality of the vote to get elected. As a result, candidates had more incentive to run on their own, soliciting votes from family and friends (and buying additional ones if needed) than in joining others in creating a political machine.

As long as districts remained small, the system worked well for the individualistic, unorganized secular candidates. In 2006, however, things changed suddenly and, from the point of view of secular candidates, for the worse. First, in April the government finally decided to push through legislation giving women the right to vote. The government had favored the legislation for years and submitted it to parliament repeatedly, but it had been blocked by the Islamist vote. The enactment of the legislation doubled the number of voters.

Second, in a showdown between reformist MPs advocating a change of the election law and the government, the emir dissolved the parliament in May and called for new elections. The new parliament immediately adopted an election law that reduced the number of electoral districts from twenty-five to five—a reform long advocated by the opposition. Suddenly, secular politicians, many of whom had supported the change, were confronted with a new, more hostile political terrain that favored the Islamists, with their superior organizations, over the individualistic secular politicians.

Secular politicians in Kuwait are acutely aware that in the new situation they need to organize in a different fashion—the number of voters

per district has increased 10 times, and the number of candidates has increased from 2 to 10 per district. The new situation greatly reduces the effectiveness of family and personal contacts as the main method for attracting votes and gives an advantage to organizations that can present lists of candidates and mount a professional campaign. Although the law limits the number of candidates on a list to four to prevent any one organization from sweeping a district, organized groups have a much better chance of winning seats. Already, two secular organizations have formed as a result, separated not by ideology and programs, but by personalities. Even those who are involved in these efforts are not overly optimistic about success. Secular politicians in Kuwait are an individualistic lot—many are successful businessmen, often scions of the original merchant families; others are intellectuals, a surprising number of whom write articles and opinion columns in newspapers, gaining recognition and publicizing their ideas. This is not how strong party organizations are built. Indeed, the idea that a political organization needs professional organizers, which has become part of the Islamist movements' modus operandi, still remains foreign to the secular politicians. In a recent series of interviews, one of the authors was repeatedly told that Islamists in Kuwait enjoy an unfair advantage over secular politicians because they can hire professional, full-time organizers. Such complaint denotes more of a difference of political culture between secular and Islamist politicians than a difference in financial means. Creating organizations with full-time staff is certainly not beyond the financial reach of people who are, for the most part, members of the business and professional class of an affluent society.

In this situation, many secular politicians are looking with hope to the rise of what can be best described as postmodern politics in Kuwait, that is, to the direct intervention in politics by members of civil society organizations that seek to pressure the government by demonstrations and other forms of street actions to further a political agenda. During the confrontation between the parliament and the government over the electoral law in 2006, students played an important part by staging demonstrations in favor of the reform, camping out in front of the parliament at night in a style that was part political action and part youth festival with music and fun. The protest was successful, leading among other factors to the dissolution of the old parliament and to the election of a new one that promptly voted to reduce the number of districts.

A surprising number of secular politicians have come to look on this style of direct intervention as a form of political action that could help secular groups increase their influence against the rise of the Islamists. The students who organized the demonstrations belonged to secular groups and fought back attempts by Islamists to claim credit for their success. Given the fick-

leness of student politics in general and the difficulty that student groups in all countries have in sustaining political activity beyond short, heady episodes, the importance secular politicians place on this style of politics appears to be greatly exaggerated. It is not based on a realistic assessment but on the hope that somehow secular politicians could erase the organizational advantage of the Islamists not by creating even stronger organizations than theirs, but by leapfrogging over the process of organizing political machines and plunging into direct action.

Uncertain Future of Secular Parties in the Arab World

The "secular" parties discussed here are crucial to a democratic transformation in the Arab world, not because they necessarily constitute the true democrats in these countries, but because without their presence the political spectrum would remain extremely narrow, and political competition would be reduced to head-on confrontation between incumbent governments and Islamist movements. A more pluralistic arena, with a broad spectrum of political actors, would make politics less confrontational, although it would certainly not eliminate all obstacles to democratic transformation. To become competitive, however, secular parties and organizations in the Arab world would first have to undergo internal transformation. In particular, they need considerable change in three areas: their vision for society; the specific political message they transmit to their potential constituencies; and the way in which they organize.

Vision

Secular parties in the Arab world have been unable to project a vision for their countries for almost thirty years. The first vision for secular Arab parties was that of independence—the Moroccan Istiqlal and the Egyptian Wafd all started as nationalist, pro-independence parties. The second vision was the "socialist" one represented by single party systems such as the Arab Socialist Union in Egypt and the Baathist parties of Syria and Iraq. More than socialist, it was a state capitalist vision of rapid economic growth and social transformation under the direction of the ruling regimes. It did not leave much space for individual freedom or initiative, but it promised growth and modernization and, at least for a while, it delivered.

Competing with these successive secular visions from the 1920s on, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its sister organizations across the Arab world set forth a vision of a just Islamic society. As long as regimes were able to deliver a better life, or at least the hope of the better life, the Islamist vision did not become dominant. During the 1970s, the popular

appeal of nationalist and socialist ruling regimes was greatly diminished by a series of Arab defeats in the struggle against Israel and by growing socioeconomic hardship as regimes could no longer deliver even the most basic services. Religious ideas became increasingly attractive, and Islamist movements began to command support among ever-widening segments of the population. In the countries where secular parties were allowed to operate, secular opposition parties also suffered. For example, liberal and leftist parties in Morocco and Egypt were trapped between failing authoritarian regimes and Islamist ideologies that promised easy solutions to all problems.

Thus far, secular parties have been unable to provide a new vision of their own. Like other leftist parties around the world after the demise of the Soviet Union, the Arab left has gradually embraced democracy and economic liberalism. Liberal parties have become more interested in the civil society arena and pushed—with varying degrees of success—for its autonomous organization. Yet, those are less visions of a good society than open-ended processes that supposedly lead to a good society but may not. Citizens in many countries undergoing democratic transformations have discovered that democracy rarely pays a dividend in the short run, and economic reforms can truly hurt for a period. Furthermore, the vision of the democratic society with an open economy is one now shared too broadly, at least in theory, for any party to claim it as its own. Many autocratic governments in the Arab world claim to be working toward democracy and a market economy, even when their actions belie their words. And many Islamist movements now accept democracy and economic liberalism as well. The democratic vision has become a crowded field that gives no party a special advantage.

Why secular opposition parties have so much difficulty in developing a vision is not clear. In part, it may be a loss of confidence in themselves—what is the point of preparing elaborate platforms if you will not get enough votes? In part, the competition from Islamists—as well as the less common pattern of secular–Islamist collaboration—compels secular parties to state that they, too, adhere to Islamic values, further watering down their positions on issues such as social and cultural freedoms. In other cases, siding with incumbent regimes against Islamists limits their ability to articulate sound alternatives to government policies. Whatever the explanation, it is clear that the failure of secular parties to project a clear vision of what they stand for is undermining their appeal.

To the dismay of secular opposition parties, the clearest secular vision being proposed in the Arab world today comes from modernizing ruling establishments in the Gulf and a few other countries. This is the vision of a society rapidly transformed by the power of sustained economic growth—what some call “the Dubai model.” The model is often cited in

oil-rich Gulf countries, where the younger generations in ruling establishments feel that their countries are missing the opportunity to pursue the aggressive path to modernity symbolized by Dubai with its explosive economic growth, modernistic architecture, and frontier atmosphere. Even in a country with a large population and scarce revenue such as Egypt, the dream of rapid modernization is pushed by heir apparent Gamal Mubarak and the people around him as their vision for the future. By and large, however, this is a vision coming from the government rather than the opposition side.

Message

Political parties competing in elections do not always have to have a vision, but they need at least a message about what they will do if they win the elections. In authoritarian and semiauthoritarian settings in the Arab world, incumbent regimes have an extremely simple and concrete message: Vote for us because we control the purse strings and can deliver. The message is becoming less convincing where the government's capacity to deliver has eroded to a great extent as in Morocco, Egypt, and Yemen. In the 1990s, even oil producers were finding it difficult to deliver at the same level as in the preceding three decades until oil prices skyrocketed again during the Iraq war. Still, incumbent regimes have more to offer and more to withhold than the opposition. Patronage is not a sophisticated message, but it is a clear and effective one.

The Islamist message is vague. "Islam is the solution" is definitely not a concrete message, yet as a slogan it appeals to emotion, tradition, and piety. Furthermore, Islamist movements have masterfully used their charity networks at the grassroots level to generate social trust and political capital. In many Arab countries today, Islamist-controlled patronage systems exist next to government-sponsored ones. Islamists have benefited from the mounting religiosity of Arab societies since the 1970s and built on it to garner popular support. But they have always coupled the religious appeal with social services for their constituencies, never taking them for granted.

Secular parties, without a distinctive vision, for the most part do not have a specific message. They have failed to strategically identify spaces, issues, and constituencies distinct from those dominated by incumbent regimes or Islamist movements and to tailor messages geared to them. But secular parties have also been less effective in challenging regimes and Islamists on mainstream issues or in penetrating their stable constituencies. And they have little to offer in terms of either financial incentives or social services. Thus, they can neither attract the more thoughtful or self-interested voters who seek a party that will represent their interests, nor do they have a simple slogan to which people respond emotionally. The results are evident at the polls.

Organization

We have already discussed the organizational weaknesses of secular parties, a problem of which they are acutely aware and know they must remedy. But these parties are uncertain about how they should organize. Should they compete against the Islamists in grassroots mobilization, embracing a classic style of organizing that many analysts consider anachronistic today but which is serving Islamist movements extremely well? Should they privilege civil society organizations over parties? If so, how does civil society organizing ultimately translate into votes and political power?

These are extremely difficult questions for secular parties in the Arab world that face a number of contradictory realities. Traditionally organized mass parties, which thrived in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, are in decline everywhere. Lack of ideological fervor and more affluent and individualistic lifestyles have seriously undermined such parties in most countries. In the Arab world, however, Islamist movements are showing convincingly that party-like structures are not only possible but also highly effective. Whether this means that Arab countries are at a different stage of political development or that political parties need a strong ideology to thrive is not clear. Regardless of the reason behind it, conventional political parties are doing much better in the Arab world than elsewhere.

The second reality, however, sends a different message. Secular parties at present do not have any competitive advantage when it comes to organizing strong party structures. They are coming from behind, having neglected grassroots mobilization and constituency building for a long time, while Islamists systematically worked to develop party structures and networks of supporting organizations. Secular parties do not have a strong ideology and a vision of society, nor do they have emotionally appealing, simple political slogans. And, in many countries, they have not developed the funding methods to sustain the staff required to carry out systematic organizing work. There is no reason to believe the problems are insurmountable—lack of funding in particular appears to be little more than an excuse in most cases—but right now secular parties are caught in a vicious circle.

The third reality is that the difference between secular parties and Islamist movements is not only one of strength but also of political style. Secular parties are not simply a paler, less successful version of Islamist ones. They represent a different type of political organization, a different style of politics. With few exceptions, secular parties in the Arab world go back to a style and tradition that precede the days of mass participation; when they depart from that tradition, secular parties fast forward to a style of politics that could be defined as postmodern, where direct

action by civil society supersedes the role of parties. Arab citizens who in the past would have gravitated toward secular political parties have turned to civil society since the 1990s. This was in part for ideological reasons—the debates about democracy and democratization taking place around the world after the end of the Cold War emphasized the importance of civil society. In part, the new popularity of civil society organizations was also pragmatic. Political parties with their aging leadership did not offer many outlets for motivated, dynamic younger people anxious to see real reform in their countries. Parties appeared old and tired, civil society organizations young and promising. Furthermore, with funding for civil society organizations available from foreign donors, particularly from European countries, launching new nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) became a feasible project—and certainly less daunting than organizing a new political party or trying to breathe new life into an old, sclerotic one.

The situation of secular parties is highly uncertain at present. They are weak in terms of vision, message, and organization. They cannot compete with the Islamists in developing conventional political parties. But secular intellectuals and activists have greatly influenced public debates on social and cultural freedoms, whereas even the most liberal Islamists remain ambivalent on such issues. In some Arab countries, secular opposition parties have a comparative advantage when it comes to launching civil society organizations that address issues such as human rights, women's rights, and minority rights. In other countries, cross-ideological alliances with Islamist movements offer secular parties a chance to move beyond the limitations of weak organizations and unstable constituencies. Most important of all, secular parties have opportunities to increase their influence: Political participation in Arab countries remains low, indicating that there are new constituencies that can potentially be captured and brought into the political process. Fighting on two fronts—against incumbent regimes and Islamist movements—secular parties in the Arab world have not yet clearly identified a political style that will allow them to become successful.

In today's Arab politics, secular parties and organizations occupy a marginal position—a situation unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Western strategies that count on secular Arab parties to push for greater freedom and participation are bound to be unsuccessful. Secular parties are too weak to change the nature of politics in their countries or to influence policy making in a meaningful, sustainable way. The conventional party assistance methods employed by various U.S. and European political party foundations cooperating with secular parties in the Arab world are designed to help parties overcome organizational weaknesses and to mount more effective election campaigns. They are not designed

to address the problems of political organizations uncertain of their identity, unsure of their ability to reach constituencies, and pessimistic about their future. The crisis of secular parties requires deeper reconsideration and reflection by these parties themselves.

Notes

1. For more information on the Muslim Brotherhood's election campaign in 2005, see Nathan Brown and Amr Hamzawy, "Can Egypt's Troubled Elections Produce a More Democratic Future?" *Policy Outlook* no. 24 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2005).
2. For more information on the Yemeni political system, see Sarah Phillips, *Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen*, Carnegie Paper no. 80 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2007).
3. For more information on Islamist movements in Kuwait, see Nathan Brown, *Pushing Toward Party Politics? Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement*, Carnegie Paper no. 79 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2007).

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