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The Limits of Limited Reforms

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Abstract

Morocco's experience suggests that expanded political liberty, especially freedom of association, can facilitate the emergence of multiple versions of political Islam, reducing the salience of a large, undifferentiated Islamist movement as an umbrella for oppositionist sentiment. The best means for containing potentially destabilizing discontent and promoting moderation among potentially antidemocratic forces are a pluralized political space and iterative free elections. The dilemmas that the king must now resolve in the face of citizen alienation reveal the limits of a strategy of gradual liberalization stage-managed from on high by a pro-Western autocrat.

Morocco's Elections

THE LIMITS OF LIMITED REFORMS

Michael McFaul and Tamara Cofman Wittes

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Can the Arab world overcome its democratic deficit? Can democratization in the Arab world produce greater stability in the Middle East? Earlier this decade, a spurt of intellectual attention and policy action nurtured cautious optimism. Some even identified regional political trends and emerging prodemocracy voices as signs that a political renaissance might sweep the Arab world. Today, however, the pendulum has swung toward pessimism. The failure (so far) of the democratic experiment in Iraq has been a major reason, though the security situation there never gave democracy a real chance. Hamas's victory in the January 2006 Palestinian Authority parliamentary elections may have done even more to dampen enthusiasm about Arab democracy, particularly in Western eyes.

The Palestinian election, said some, was proof that if Arabs were allowed to vote freely and effectually, they would bring antidemocratic, destabilizing Islamist radicals to power. For the Middle East's many autocrats, the Hamas win was a rhetorical godsend—a cautionary tale at which they could gesture as they stomped energetically on whatever democratic embers might threaten to stir to life in their own countries. In parallel with Arab autocrats, even those Western analysts and officials who had once been favorably inclined began to doubt the wisdom of promoting democratic change in the region. As regimes such as Egypt's began to pull back on their latest rounds of modest liberalization, the U.S. government in turn seemed to all but abandon President George W. Bush's "freedom agenda" in the Middle East.

On 7 September 2007, the people of the Kingdom of Morocco gave

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