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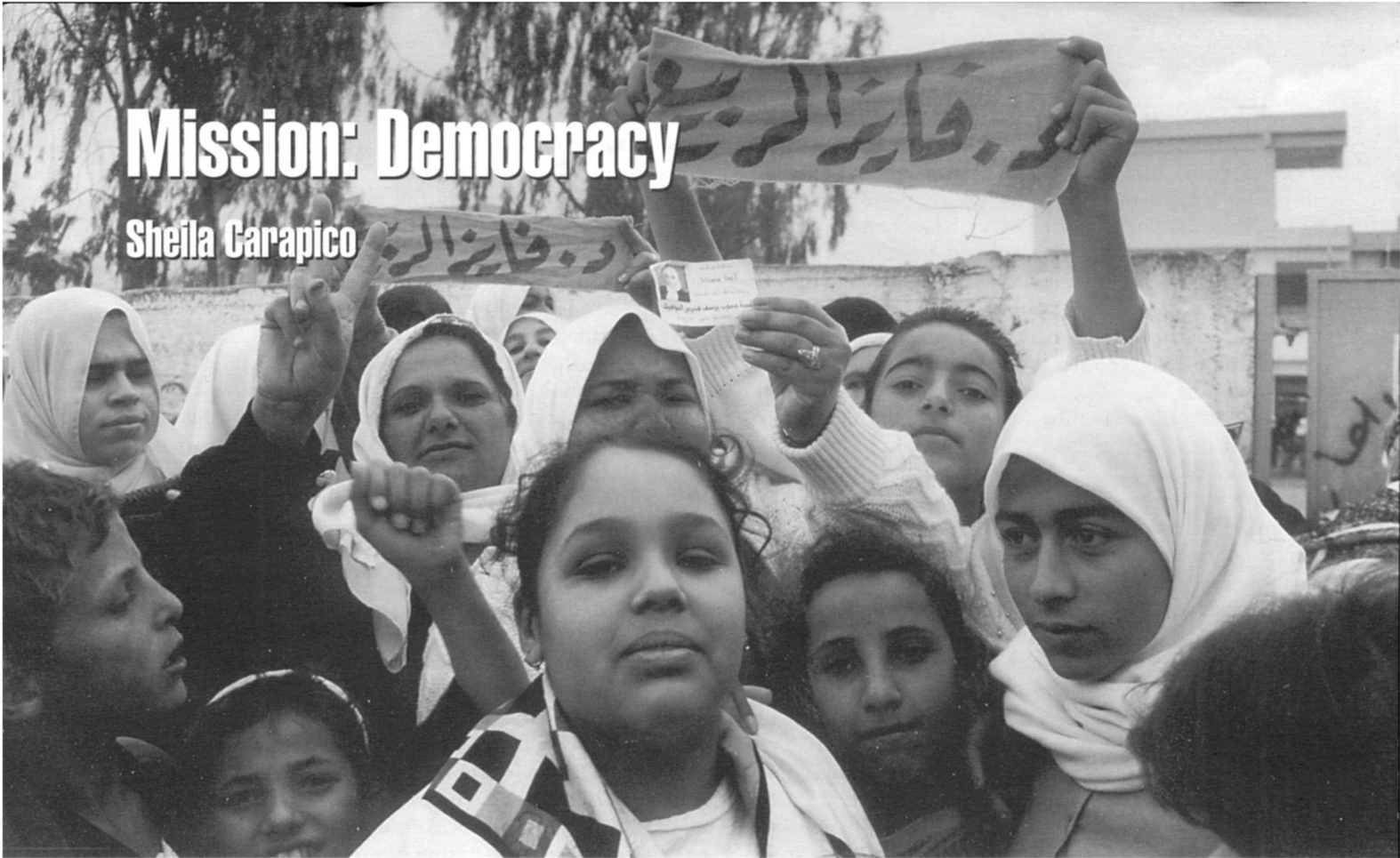
Recommended Citation

Carapico, Sheila. "Mission Democracy." *Middle East Report* 209 28, no. 4 (1998): 17-20, 40.

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Mission: Democracy

Sheila Carapico



Women and children display campaign signs for an Islamist candidate in the Baqa'a Palestinian Refugee Camp, Jordan, 1997.

Jillian Schwedler

Incumbent national leaders invite foreign election monitors only when it is in their interest to do so. Rarely is significant financial assistance “conditional” on holding elections, although it does improve a regime’s image abroad to do so. For governments being observed, the trick is to orchestrate the process enough to win, but not enough to arouse observers’ suspicions.

Stereotypes of inherent Arab and Islamic antipathy to political liberalism notwithstanding, Western agencies have spent millions of dollars and thousands of staff-days “democratizing” Middle Eastern countries over the past decade. Elections experts and observers employ a distinctive methodology that frames national politics in terms of observable universal criteria. A complex multinational bureaucracy dispatches missions to undertake projects that are part translation, part documentary—projects with a distinctive scenario, plot and denouement. In the Arab world, as in Central America, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, such projects tend to be self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating. The arrival of consultants and monitors raises, but rarely fulfills, the democratic aspirations of voters, grassroots activists and opposition candidates.

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Donors and Democracy Experts

Elections experts, like other development professionals, join expeditionary teams called “missions,” e.g., a mission to draft an elections law or to observe voting procedures. Missions also have “a mission”: to improve the technical aspects of polling or to help ensure that the outcome is “free and fair.”

Elections projects are distinguished from traditional foreign aid primarily by a tight time-table in the months, weeks and days leading up to balloting. Compared with ongoing economic development assistance and multi-year institution-building projects for state bureaucracies, elections-related missions are uniquely episodic. Technical assistance for elections dispatches foreign experts to capital cities for six months or so before the elections, then flies in monitoring teams for a week or a fortnight of advice or training. Known as “short-term observer missions” inside the industry and “elections tourism” by de-

tractors, monitoring delegations are dispatched on short notice for the finite purpose of observing practices in a sample of precincts while votes are cast and counted.

International observation of Arab elections is a recent innovation, associated with several trends in the post-Cold War "third wave of democracy." No sooner had the Berlin Wall fallen than elections consultants headed for Central Europe to facilitate an enthusiastically anticipated transition to political and economic liberalism. At the same time, exposés of past aid-enriched dictators like Marcos, Duvalier, Mobuto and Suharto led to policy reforms within donor agencies and the emergence of First World constituencies for the protection of human rights, women's rights, environments and other worthy causes in the Third World. By the mid-1990s, World Bank economic policy-makers had decided that democratic institutions foster sustainable growth, and elections moved to the forefront of major powers' foreign policy agendas.¹

In its early days the United Nations pioneered elections-monitoring under its mandate to assist new nations, African trust territories on the road to independence and nations recovering from civil war—criteria recently evident in Palestinian autonomous areas, post-civil war Lebanon, newly united and post-civil war Yemen, newly independent Eritrea and member nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Under exceptional circumstances, most recently Bosnia and Cambodia, the Security Council directs the UN/Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD) to supervise or organize elections. The Arab League and the Organization of African Unity may also send observers on behalf of member states. Prior to the late 1980s, however, bilateral monitoring of elections was something of a taboo. Only during the past decade has there been "a modification of the concept of intervention" such that poll-watching and related technical assistance are not necessarily considered to infringe upon national sovereignty.²

Currently a wide array of transnational institutions is directly or indirectly involved in engineering or monitoring elections. Under the Maastricht Common Foreign and Security Policy's mandate for electoral assistance and observation, the European Union's Election Unit (EUEU) devoted hundreds of expert-months to preparation and observation of the historic Palestinian and South African elections.³ Like its counterparts in Canada, the Netherlands and Germany, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) pursues "good governance" and "civil and political rights" through a range of projects promoting parliamentary, judicial and civil society institution-building,⁴ while the separately-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) provides grants to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) for transnational projects.⁵ Five German party-affiliated *stiftungen* (institutes), most prominently those associated with the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, send missions to strengthen or observe the conduct of elections, as do

semi-autonomous Canadian, Dutch and French foundations. While a few, such as the Carter Center or the Soros Foundation, are privately financed, other groups, such as the US-UK group International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) or Elections Canada, implement programs under contracts with aid agencies.

Perhaps contrary to the perceptions of many Americans, election monitoring is not simply an exercise in American influence but a multilateral, multifaceted undertaking.⁶ American aid, decoupled from poverty, supports security policy with massive transfers to Israel, a huge mission in Egypt and significant programs in Jordan, Palestinian communities and the new CIS republics, while maintaining a low profile elsewhere in the region. USAID missions in Tunisia, Yemen, Oman and Pakistan have been terminated, while Morocco and Lebanon receive only token US aid. Thus, despite America's highly visible military posture in the region, most needy countries rely more upon European or multilateral assistance than upon US economic loans and grants. Moreover, US allies and even American NGOs often try to distance themselves from US military actions against Arab targets. By the same token, elections provide occasions for a special, short-term, technically unofficial American display of expertise and interest in those countries that do not enjoy US foreign assistance. Rhetoric notwithstanding, the Clinton Administration's democracy promotion efforts are essentially realpolitik.⁷

Selective Democratization

In the Near and Middle East, foreigners monitor elections in low- or medium-income countries seeking private commercial bank loans and direct investments as well as public concessional credits, direct grants and technical assistance. The governments of Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, Pakistan, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan hope well-publicized elections will win them favor with Western donors and creditors.

In contrast, pariah regimes and Western allies alike reject elections monitoring as a violation of their national sovereignty. Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, Sudan and Afghanistan unanimously vilify Western democratic rhetoric as nothing more than neo-imperialism and castigate monitors as espionage agents.

Friends and allies of the US are also sensitive to political meddling. No monitors oversee elections in Turkey, the region's only NATO member, nor in Israel, the region's only stable parliamentary democracy. Israel, which, despite its high standard of living remains the largest recipient of US aid in the world (and a beneficiary of much private charity), takes cash rather than technical assistance: it does not have a USAID mission offering American expertise. Even in Egypt, where substantial American and European aid packages include funds for parliamentary libraries, liberal think tanks and

the like, the regime has not permitted outsiders to inspect its electoral processes.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, too rich to qualify for US, UN, World Bank or European economic assistance, control even local journalistic reporting as tightly as any of the region's states, and regard democracy as a Western construct alien to their cultural and religious heritage. Only Kuwait, with great fanfare orchestrated by Washington public relations firms, welcomed international observers to its post-Gulf War parliamentary elections, then demonstrated further appreciation for liberal politics with a \$50,000 donation to the Congressional Human Rights Foundation.⁸ The International Republican Institute was permitted to write a study of Oman's legislature, but was careful not to call for elections,⁹ while Bahraini intellectuals' pleas for international support of their pro-democracy movement have fallen on deaf ears.

The Election-Day Theatrical Display

Journalists, scholars and professionals from across the political spectrum have critically scrutinized elections-related activities of donors and semi-autonomous foundations in the Americas and Europe. In Latin America and the Caribbean, US aid programs built up national security apparatuses¹⁰ and encouraged what have been called "demonstration elections," often funding right-wing candidates. Until the constitutional court outlawed the practice in the 1990s, the German Federal Republic's *stiftungen* coached and bankrolled selected foreign

parties.¹¹ Western powers hand-picked non-Communist parties, candidates and organizations in Russia,¹² Czechoslovakia and Hungary,¹³ and orchestrated and validated fraudulent Bosnian elections.¹⁴ After just a couple of years, Poles dubbed Warsaw's "reform consultants" the "Marriott Brigades."¹⁵ Throughout the former Communist countries, the initial hopes that consultants from Western democracies would impart valuable secrets of liberal governance have now soured, leaving in their wake a far more cynical view of monitoring processes choreographed carefully for "representatives of the international community."

These experiences have been repeated in the Arab world. Elections are preceded by a stream of project designers, evaluators, consultants and observers who arrive soon after elections are announced in order to survey, advise and train local officials and participants. Anticipating the landmark 1996 legislative elections in the West Bank and Gaza,¹⁶ the EUEU, NDI, IRI, IFES, Arab-American groups, the Carter Center and other North American and European institutions dispatched missions or established offices in an extraordinary commissioning of studies, training programs and technical assistance on matters such as constituency-drawing, voter registration, polling security and vote-counting.

A week or so before polling day, all the hotels in places like Rabat, Sana'a or Almaty are booked solid with monitors and observers from around the world. It costs a lot of money to field a small team of experts or a large observer delegation, especially if they fly from the US: salaries, airfare, translators, set-up expenses for assessment

and monitoring put the international price-tag of elections for the Palestinian, Yemeni and Jordanian parliaments in the range of several dollars per voter.

Incumbent national leaders invite foreign monitors only when it is in their interest to do so. Rarely is significant financial assistance “conditional” on holding elections, although it does improve a regime’s image abroad to do so. Even though the net transfer of cash and goods is minimal and the hosting of experts can impose hidden costs, funds-hungry regimes in poor countries anticipate material or political rewards. Seminars, junkets and honoraria for local officials, NGO activists, intellectuals and loyal-opposition figures help “sell” them on the electoral process. Beyond the electoral arena where parties compete for domestic constituencies, they vie for international patronage, political as well as financial.¹⁷

Under these circumstances, electoral festivities are choreographed by and for visiting dignitaries. Mission leaders and delegates meet with “everyone who’s anyone.” Reporting stations in big hotels or convention centers distribute materials in English, while citizens await the ballot results *via* international satellite television. National broadcasters feature or contrive the “stamp of approval” of delegations from America and Europe. In one such instance, after Yemen’s 1993 parliamentary elections, the NDI complained to the Supreme Elections Committee (SEC) that its objections to ruling party manipulation of a local elections monitoring committee sponsored by NDI “were inaccurately portrayed on television as emphatic NDI endorsements of the SEC and its success in establishing fool-proof mechanisms for free and fair elections.”¹⁸

Some monitors have suspected that what they witnessed was detached from political reality. One wrote that “legions [of] private contractors who claim expertise in the ‘building of democracy’” descended on Kyrgyzstan prior to its elections in early 1993. They “took up residence in the former communist party hotels and created an artificial community of contractors” isolated from local society. “The substantive democracy aid itself,” he concluded, “was so abstract, so self-referential and inappropriate” that it had minimal effect.¹⁹ A field observer in Pakistan—one of about 20 Americans in a 40-person, 16-nation team organized by NDI—sensed that the real action was all at the edges of the team’s peripheral vision: He “left with a nagging feeling of unease... [over] what we did not see.”²⁰ Privately, field observers have complained that a statement congratulating the government on a successful election is often written in the home office before the field mission has made its evaluation (or even before all polling stations have reported results), rendering the exercise somewhat spurious.

For governments being observed, then, the trick is to orchestrate the process enough to win, but not enough to arouse observers’ suspicions. Poll-watchers like to see long, orderly lines of citizens, especially women. Outcomes are more credible if ruling parties yield at least some

seats to the peaceful opposition, and when posters, television coverage and rallies testify to a multi-party contest in which the ruling party out-campaigned its rivals. Violence or wholesale manipulation while monitors are on hand will mar the experience, as occurred when OSCE and NDI observers refused to verify the reëlection of Azerbaijan’s president in October 1998, citing clear evidence of ballot-stuffing and fraud. Otherwise, it is a matter of judging whether irregularities are of sufficient magnitude to invalidate the results.²¹

In countries dependent on foreign financing, if the election goes well, it is an indication that electoral officials, party officers, candidates and campaigners have been well coached. Voting has been orderly, open to inspection and has followed a codified process. The victorious party deployed the sorts of campaign slogans, literature, advertising and strategy that experts believe win elections. In this case, it can be concluded that the government has a “mandate.”

These messages are not lost on Arab voters. As in Central Europe, initial hopes that Westerner experts offered a political panacea have turned to incredulity, disappointment and ultimately skepticism. Beyond the circle of English-speaking Egyptian development professionals in Cairo, many community and political activists are wary of foreign funders—period. Egyptian professionals, meanwhile, may resent better-paid foreign experts who require translators to learn what they as local experts already know. Many voters would rather receive a couple of dollars than a delegation of international monitors. Disillusionment springs not from cultural or religious dispositions, but from raised and unmet democratic aspirations.²² When elected parliaments pass laws slashing jobs, social security and public services while also raising or imposing fees for water, energy, medicines, food and other necessities, the act of voting is stripped of its policy relevance and participatory meaning.

In conclusion, elections in the Middle East are not purely domestic phenomena, though we should not reduce the entire exercise to a mere projection of Western neo-liberal hegemony. As assisted governments attempt to enhance their internal and external images, a transnational, post-Cold War liberal establishment rationalizes and interprets chaotic politics through the lens of universal formulas. Election monitoring opens a political system to scrutiny, placing national politics on worldwide exhibition. Monitoring enframes national politics, representing to the outside world an appearance of order through constituency maps, diagrams of parliament, legal appendices, executive summaries of progress and problems and accounts of structured interviews. Tutorials are translated down a hierarchy of expertise from Western capitals to English-speaking elites in Cairo or Almaty, to college students and educated rural people, to voters and poll-workers in the periphery, ultimately

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bringing representatives of the former to document the performance of the latter. Thus, although international monitors may help to make "first" elections peaceful and perhaps to keep sitting governments honest, there is also a risk that outsiders merely validate the claims of incumbent parties to a dubious democratic base. ■

Endnotes

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22 See for instance Muhammad al-Hayawan in *al-Wafd*, June 29, 1998, p. 14 (FBIS-NES-98-108), about disillusionment with American aid programs.