

# AN “ARAB” MORE THAN “MUSLIM” ELECTORAL GAP

*Alfred Stepan with Graeme B. Robertson*

*Alfred Stepan is Wallace Sayre Professor of Government at Columbia University and the author, most recently, of *Arguing Comparative Politics* (2001). Graeme B. Robertson is a doctoral candidate in political science at Columbia University, and a fellow at the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton University.*

It is well known that the “democracy gap” is particularly wide in the countries of the Arab world, not one of which is democratic, and all of which have predominantly or overwhelmingly Muslim populations. Indeed, the 16 Arab countries form the largest single readily identifiable group among all those states that “underachieve” (relative to what one would expect from their levels of Gross Domestic Product per capita [GDPpc]) when it comes to the holding of competitive elections. In sharp contrast to this stands the scarcely less striking—yet undernoticed—situation among the world’s 31 Muslim-majority but non-Arab countries, which in fact form the single largest bloc of all those countries that “greatly overachieve” relative to their GDPpc levels when competitive elections are in question.

How to analyze this pattern? The first stage is quantitative, and requires reviewing two independent data sets, each of which covers the years 1972 to 2000. This first stage has a double aim: to compare the overall degree of electoral competitiveness found in Arab as opposed to non-Arab Muslim-majority countries; and to compare the degree of electoral competitiveness found in very poor majority-Muslim countries with that found where religions other than Islam predominate.

The second stage is qualitative, and involves independently assessing which of the world’s 47 Muslim-majority states meets a reasonable set of basic criteria for “electoral competitiveness.”

The third and final stage in the analysis is to highlight the five major theoretical and political implications that the results of the first two steps suggest.

To be clear, this essay does not evaluate countries on a full range of

democratic criteria, but only endeavors to determine in which countries: 1) the government sprang from reasonably fair elections; and 2) the elected government was able to fill the most important political offices. If a polity meets these requirements, it is here deemed “electorally competitive.”

Of course, electoral competitiveness in and of itself is never equivalent to democracy: Some electorally competitive countries are not fully law-bound; some do not have full control of the territory of the state; some at times violate both their constitutions and human rights; some fall short of the requirements of consolidated democracy in other ways. But electoral competitiveness is always a necessary condition for democracy, and thus always a central factor to consider when evaluating prospects for future democratization.<sup>1</sup>

In assessing patterns of electoral competitiveness in the Muslim world, one must bear in mind that the process of ranking countries according to their levels of political rights is unavoidably subjective and often controversial. Fortunately, two separate data sets exist—the Polity Project, founded by political scientist Ted Gurr, and Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*—both of which gauge political rights in almost every country. The first year for which both Polity and Freedom House have comparative scores on such rights is 1972, so we begin our analysis from that date.

The current version of the Polity project is called “Polity IV” and provides data up through 2000.<sup>2</sup> Polity IV ranks countries on a scale that ranges from “strongly autocratic” at minus-10 to “strongly democratic” at plus-10. For present purposes, countries that score in the top third of this range (+4 or better) are “electorally competitive.”

Freedom House uses a 7-point scale of “political rights,” ranging from 1 (the highest level) to 7 (the lowest).<sup>3</sup> Again, for present purposes, a Freedom House score of 3 or better signals that a country is “electorally competitive.” To identify significant periods of reasonably high political rights, Table 1 on the following page presents data from a period of about 30 years on two partially overlapping sets of Muslim-majority countries: those that have experienced at least three consecutive years of substantial political rights according to both Polity and Freedom House, and those that have experienced at least five consecutive years of such rights. The list of “Muslim-majority countries” comes from an essay that the president of Freedom House published in these pages in January 2002.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 allows the reader to examine how Arab and non-Arab Muslim-majority countries compare when it comes to political rights. The differences are striking. Of 29 non-Arab Muslim-majority countries evaluated by Polity IV, 11 (more than a third), enjoyed significant political rights for at least three consecutive years, while 8 of 29 (more than a quarter), experienced at least five consecutive years.<sup>5</sup> With Freedom House, the scores are remarkably similar: 12 of 31 had relatively high levels of politi-

**TABLE 1—MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES WITH THREE OR MORE CONSECUTIVE YEARS OF MODERATELY HIGH POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL RIGHTS BETWEEN 1972–73 AND 2001–2002: POLITY IV AND FREEDOM HOUSE RANKINGS**

At Least 3 Consecutive Years			
NON-ARAB MUSLIM		ARAB MUSLIM	
Polity IV*	Freedom House**	Polity IV	Freedom House
Albania, Bangladesh, Comoros, The Gambia, Malaysia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Turkey 11/29	Albania, Bangladesh, Djibouti, The Gambia, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Turkey 12/31	Lebanon  1/16	Lebanon  1/16

  

At Least 5 or More Consecutive Years			
NON-ARAB MUSLIM		ARAB MUSLIM	
Polity IV*	Freedom House**	Polity IV	Freedom House
Bangladesh, Comoros, The Gambia, Malaysia, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey 8/29	Bangladesh, Djibouti, The Gambia, Malaysia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Turkey 8/31	None	None

\* Countries receiving a score of +4 or better from Polity IV for their strongly democratic (+10) to strongly autocratic (-10) POLITY2 variable. N.B.: There are no data for Maldives and Brunei.

\*\* Countries receiving a score of 3 or better on the Freedom House Index of Political Rights. Sources: Polity IV Project, Integrated Network for Societal Conflict Research (INSCR) Program, Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) University of Maryland, College Park, [www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/inscr/polity](http://www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/inscr/polity) and [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

cal rights for at least three consecutive years, while 8 of 31 did for five consecutive years. Albania, Bangladesh, the Gambia, Malaysia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey are rated by both research teams as meeting the three-year criterion, and of these, all but Albania and Niger meet the five-year criterion. On the Arab side there is complete agreement between the two sources. Only Lebanon experienced three consecutive years of relatively strong political rights, and those years came before the civil war that began in 1975 and lasted until 1990. No Arab country experienced five consecutive years of strong rights performance. As two independent sources document over three decades, the difference between Arab and non-Arab Muslim-majority countries in this regard is arresting.

Looking at the same Polity IV and Freedom House data in another way, Arab Muslim-majority countries received a political-rights score that rates as “electorally competitive” (a +4 from Polity and a 3 from Freedom House) in only 3 out of 434 possible country-years. In sharp contrast, non-Arab Muslim-majority countries received such a score in 97 of a possible 697 country-years. In this 30-year period, then, a non-

Arab Muslim-majority country was almost 20 times more likely to be “electorally competitive” than an Arab Muslim-majority country.

While non-Arab Muslim-majority countries clearly have a better record on political rights than do Arab Muslim-majority countries, is it possible to say anything more about just how electorally “underachieving” or “overachieving” each of the two Muslim-majority subsets actually is? Developmental—and to a lesser extent democratic—theory indicates that one must control for a country’s relative wealth, since the proposition that as wealth increases so does the degree of electoral contestation is among the strongest and best-corroborated findings in all of social science. We can call this the “developmental thesis.”<sup>6</sup> How then do Arab and non-Arab Muslim-majority countries compare when one controls for GDP?

### Quantitative Findings

One way to proceed is to propose six categories of countries ranging along a continuum from “overachieving” to “underachieving” on political rights relative to GDPpc.<sup>7</sup> At the “overachieving” end of the continuum, a country with an annual GDPpc below \$1,500 but a record of significant political rights for at least three consecutive years, would be a “great electoral overachiever.” A country with a similar record on political rights and that has annual per capita income between \$1,500 and \$3,500 would be an “electoral overachiever.” At middling levels of GDPpc, where one may expect the developmental thesis to be less determinative, it would make sense to put a country with annual GDPpc between \$3,500 and \$5,500 in a “theoretically indeterminate” range. If a country’s yearly GDPpc tops \$5,500 and there are substantial political rights there, it would be called “electorally competitive as predicted.”

For the countries without significant experience of political rights, there would be two additional categories: States with an annual GDPpc of less than \$3,500 would be called “electorally uncompetitive as predicted.” (This category is particularly important, because many majority-Muslim countries are quite poor and, from the perspective of the developmental thesis not electorally competitive “as predicted,” and are thus not evidence per se of Muslim exceptionalism.) Finally, a country with yearly GDPpc above \$5,500 but little or nothing in the way of electoral competition would be an “electoral underachiever.” (See Table 2 on the following page.)

In the non-Arab Muslim-majority subset, 9 countries—or 31 percent—are rated by both Polity IV and Freedom House as having experienced at least three consecutive years of substantial political rights. Strikingly, 7 of these 9 are clear “overachievers.” Moreover, 5 of these 9 countries have less than a \$1,500 per capita income and classify as “great overachievers.” Twenty of 29 countries are rated as having no sufficient experience of political rights, but 18 of these have an annual

**TABLE 2—EXPERIENCE AND NON-EXPERIENCE OF MODERATELY ROBUST POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL RIGHTS FOR AT LEAST THREE CONSECUTIVE YEARS BETWEEN 1972–2000 IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES: BY PER CAPITA GDP**

Some Experience of Robust Electoral Rights				No Experience of Robust Electoral Rights		
Great Electoral Overachievers (under \$1,500)	Electoral Overachievers (\$1,500–\$3,500)	Electorally Competitive As Predicted (over \$5,500)	Theoretically Indeterminate (\$3,500–\$5,500)	Theoretically Indeterminate (\$3,500–\$5,500)	Electorally Non-Competitive As Predicted (under \$3,500)	Electoral Underachievers (over \$5,500)
<b>Non-Arab Muslim-Majority Countries</b>						
Bangladesh (1,337), The Gambia (1,462), Mali (692), Niger (736), Nigeria (833)  5/29	Albania (3,023), Pakistan (1,823)  2/29	Turkey (6,297), Malaysia (8,141)  2/29	None	Iran (5,343), Kazakhstan (4,544)  2/29	Afghanistan (800), Azerbaijan (2,016), Burkina Faso (875), Chad (825), Comoros (1,552), Djibouti (1,300), Eritrea (825), Guinea (1,808), Indonesia (3,120), Kyrgyzstan (2,206), Mauritania (1,589), Senegal (1,317), Sierra Leone (633), Somalia (600), Sudan (1,000), Tajikistan (1,140), Turkmenistan (3,116), Uzbekistan (2,104)  18/29	None
<b>Arab Muslim-Majority Countries</b>						
None	None	None	Lebanon (4,182)  1/16	Algeria (4,839), Jordan (3,965), Tunisia (5,305)  3/16	Egypt (3,054), Iraq (2,500), Morocco (3,477), Syria (3,223), Yemen (746)  5/16	Bahrain (14,155), Kuwait (17,289), Libya (8,900), Oman (7,700), Qatar (20,300), Saudi Arabia (11,150), U.A.E. (21,183)  7/16

Sources: World Bank (except for Afghanistan, Brunei, Djibouti, Iraq, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, and Tajikistan, which are taken from [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook)). Numbers in parentheses represent GDP per capita in 1996 USD (PPP). Data on political rights and electoral competitiveness are from Table 1. N.B.: No data are included for Brunei and Maldives.

per capita GDP below \$3,500 and so are “as predicted” and not evidence of a Muslim electoral gap as such.

When one examines those Muslim-majority countries which are predominantly Arab, a different picture emerges. Seven of them—44 percent of the subset—exceed the \$5,500 GDPpc level but have never during the 30 years achieved significant political rights for three years running: These states are electoral “underachievers.”<sup>8</sup> And while 31 percent of the non-Arab countries with Muslim majorities are electoral “overachievers,” not a single one of the Arab Muslim-majority states is.

Shifting the focus to the religious identities of the 38 countries the world over that suffer from extreme poverty (defined as GDPpc of less than \$1,500 per year), one notes that there is in this set *no* comparative Muslim gap whatsoever when it comes to political rights. Only 32 percent of the non-Islamic countries in this impoverished group have experienced three or more consecutive years of what we call “electoral competitiveness” according to both the Polity IV and Freedom House measures. The comparable figure for all Muslim-majority countries with a 1996 GDPpc of \$1,500 or less is 31 percent, while for non-Arab Muslim-majority countries at that income level it is 33 percent. The only Arab country to fall into the very poor group is Yemen; it is not electorally competitive. (See Table 3 on the following page.)

Looking at the most recent rankings from Polity (2000) and Freedom House (2002–2003), one sees that eight non-Arab Muslim-majority countries received scores from both research teams indicating electoral competitiveness, and that no Arab country received such a score from either team. Indeed, 16 non-Arab Muslim-majority countries rank higher than any Arab country. (See Table 4 on p. 37.)

### Qualitative Findings

Were the eight governments that the Polity and Freedom House ranking *say* were produced by elections actually so produced? And does qualitative analysis bear out the researchers’ judgments about the electoral noncompetitiveness of Arab Muslim-majority countries?

The independent evaluation prepared as part of this essay shows that as of March 2003, competitive, relatively fair elections had indeed produced the current governments and most politically powerful officeholders in at least six non-Arab Muslim-majority countries. In Turkey, the party most feared by the military, the Islamic-influenced Justice and Development Party, won the 2002 parliamentary elections and is now the governing party. In the Senegalese presidential election of 2000, the incumbent lost even though he was from the party that had been in power since 1960. In Mali, the 2002 presidential race also saw the incumbent go down at the polls. In Indonesia, the candidate from the military’s long-ruling party lost the 1999 elections and the opposition formed the

**TABLE 3—PERCENTAGE OF “GREAT ELECTORAL OVERACHIEVERS” IN THE 38 COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD WITH PER CAPITA INCOME BELOW \$1,500: BY RELIGION**

Muslim*		Non-Muslim		Total 32% (12/38)
31% (5/16)		32% (7/22)		
Arab	Non-Arab	Christian**	Other***	
0% (0/1)	33% (5/15)	30% (3/10)	33% (4/12)	

\* See Table 1 for a list of Muslim-majority countries that have experienced 3 or more consecutive years of scores of +4 or better on Polity IV index and 3 or better on Freedom House political rights. The only Arab country in this group, Yemen, has not experienced such a period of rights.

\*\*The Christian-majority countries that have experienced 3 or more consecutive years of moderately robust political and electoral rights are Central African Republic, Malawi, and Zambia. Other Christian-majority countries are Burundi, Congo (Brazzaville), Congo (Kinshasa), Haiti, Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda. All except Haiti are located near central Africa.

\*\*\* The countries that have experienced 3 or more consecutive years of moderately robust political and electoral rights in “Other” are Nepal (Hindu) and, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, and Mozambique in which at least 50 percent of the population are classified as practicing indigenous or animist religions. The systems that are not electorally competitive are found in the Buddhist countries of Bhutan, Cambodia, and Laos, indigenous-dominated Benin and the countries where no religion has more than 50 percent, namely, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Tanzania.

Sources: For sources on per capita GDP data see Table 2. The sources on religion are from *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, 2001–2002* (New York: Freedom House, 2002) and *CIA World Factbook* ([www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook)). Data on political competitiveness are from Polity IV and Freedom House.

government. Bangladesh’s last two parliamentary elections have been energetically or even bitterly contested, and each led to a turnover of power.<sup>9</sup> And in poverty-stricken Niger—where 2001 GDPpc was less than \$750, about the same as in Yemen—the current president and prime minister (notably from rival parties) came to office through a voting process in which “the fairness and transparency of the legislative and presidential polls have been recognized by national and international observers, and, most importantly, by all the political actors involved.”<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, the chaotic and suspect quality of Nigeria’s 1999 national elections divides observers and raises questions about whether, Polity and Freedom House rankings aside, it makes sense to call Nigeria “electorally competitive.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise with Albania: While Freedom House over the last two years has given it a political-rights score of 3, and while the 2001 elections were a considerable improvement over those of 1997, there are continuing problems with the extension of legitimate state power over the whole of the national territory, particularly in the north. And the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe claimed that the electoral process continued to display “serious flaws.”

The electoral situation appears radically different in the 16 Arab Muslim-majority countries. There is strong *prima facie* evidence that in *none* of these countries were the most politically powerful positions filled by a government that had achieved office through a reasonably free and fair vote. Yet within the Arab world there is variation in the frequency and significance of elections. For our purposes, we can classify the 16 Arab countries into three categories: completely autocratic states, *liberalizing* but not yet

**TABLE 4—POLITY IV'S 21-POINT SCALE FROM STRONGLY DEMOCRATIC TO STRONGLY NON-DEMOCRATIC MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES, IN 2000\***

Polity Scale	Non-Arab Majority	Arab Majority
+10		
+9		
+8	Senegal	
+7	Indonesia, Turkey	
+6	Bangladesh, Mali	
+5	Albania	
+4	Niger, Nigeria	
+3	Iran, Malaysia	
+2	Djibouti	
+1		
0	Sierra Leone, Somalia	
-1	Comoros, Guinea, Tajikistan	
-2	Chad	Jordan, Yemen
-3	Burkina Faso, Kyrgyzstan	Algeria, Tunisia
-4	Kazakhstan	
-5	Gambia	
-6	Eritrea, Mauritania, Pakistan	Morocco, Egypt
-7	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Sudan	Kuwait, Libya, Syria
-8		U.A.E.
-9	Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	Bahrain, Iraq, Oman
-10		Saudi Arabia, Qatar

\*All eight of the non-Arab Muslim-majority countries which Polity IV scores as +4 or better (plus Sierra Leone) are also listed as "electoral democracies" by Freedom House for 2002–2003 in that, among other things, they "meet the minimum standards of relatively free and fair elections."

Source: Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jagers, Polity IV Project, Integrated Network for Societal Conflict Research (INSCR) Program, Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM), University of Maryland, College Park, [www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/polity](http://www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/polity). N.B.: There are no data for Maldives and Brunei. Lebanon is also listed as missing due to "foreign interruption."

democratizing states, and states that once showed some degree of democratic opening but which have since fallen further away from becoming electorally competitive.

In the complete autocracies (Saudi Arabia, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and with a minor qualification the United Arab Emirates), there have been *no* meaningful elections to fill the most important offices. The United Arab Emirates is not as dictatorial as the other countries in this category because it is a somewhat decentralized and consensual federation. Its president (there has only been one since it formed in 1971, Sheikh Zayed ibn Sultan al-Nuhayyan) is chosen through an election of sorts, but it is one in which only seven votes are cast: one on behalf of each of the traditional rulers of the federation's seven emirates.

The second category of Arab countries (Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman) has recently generated some excitement among democrats optimistic about the possibility of political *liberalization*, as elections have begun to play some role in these countries. In none of them, however, have the most important and powerful political offices actually been filled by way of free and fair elections. In all, traditional monarchs still have great decree and appointment powers.

The issue is obviously not that these countries are monarchies: Many of the world's most longstanding and respected consolidated democracies are monarchies, albeit constitutional ones (the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands: the list is extensive). Such constitutional monarchies are all parliamentary democracies, in which the



government is elected *pro tem* and accountable to an elected lower house. The lower houses must approve all laws; the elected government fills the most important state offices; and both the elected government and the monarch are highly constrained by written and unwritten constitutions which are legally and politically enforceable by a series of institutions: most importantly, an independent judiciary. Virtually none of these attributes of constitutional monarchy are yet found in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, or Oman. All four are thus cases of tentative *liberalization* but absolutely not of democratization or even “electoral competitiveness.”<sup>12</sup>

The final category of Arab countries comprises those that are not now “electorally competitive” but at one time did use free and fair elections to fill the most politically powerful offices in the state (Lebanon); that once seemed to be close to doing so but have since stagnated (Yemen, Morocco, and Jordan); or that had a possible political opening but are now substantially farther away from being electorally competitive (Egypt and, arguably, Algeria). From 1972 through 1975, Freedom House gave Lebanon an impressive 2 ranking on respect for political rights. Subsequently, however, Lebanon began to deteriorate, and for each of the last ten years has received the second-lowest possible ranking (a 6) on political rights. Much of this decline is due to a severe “stateness” problem: The 1975 to 1990 civil war—gravely complicated by the Arab-Israeli conflict and the presence of Israeli and Syrian forces on Lebanese soil, plus the activities of militias from the Palestine Liberation Organization and Iranian-supported Hezbollah guerrillas and the presence of at least 350,000 Palestinian refugees—disrupted normal political life. It is unlikely that the influence of Syria’s Ba’athist dictatorship on the Lebanese president and part of the parliament will end until the 20,000 or so Syrian troops now in Lebanon leave, and this is in turn unlikely until the Arab-Israeli conflict is settled.<sup>13</sup>

Jordan was probably closest to democratization in 1989–92: King Hussein (d. 1999) had lifted martial law and allowed the lower house of parliament to be popularly chosen in the freest election ever. The opposition could pass a vote of no confidence in the prime minister’s government, and there were growing demands to reduce the royal powers and prerogatives, which included the unilateral right to dissolve the parliament and to veto its legislation. But since 1993, electoral malrepresentation has increased, press laws have been tightened, and in June 2001, King Abdallah II dissolved the parliament and has since issued more than 80 decrees. He postponed the parliamentary elections that were scheduled for November 2001. At the time of this writing, elections for the House of Deputies (the lower house) were scheduled to be held on 17 June 2003.<sup>14</sup>

Yemen is a clear case of reversal in electoral competitiveness. The 1993 parliamentary election was considered reasonably fair; the 1997 one less so; the president, Ali Abdallah Salih, is more important than the parliament; and in 1999 he won reelection after blocking all cred-

ible opponents. In Egypt, the 1995 elections that gave the ruling party of Hosni Mubarak (president since 1981) 94 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly were heavily marked by fraud, coercion, and bans on many potentially competitive parties.<sup>15</sup> Algeria had, in William Quandt's judgment, "honest competitive elections" in the years 1989 to 1991. But the military coup following the first round of the National Assembly elections in late 1991 meant not only that the (Islamist) probable victors of the second round would not be allowed to form the government, but also that the country would plunge into a brutal internal war that has so far caused more than 100,000 deaths. Since 1997, two parliamentary elections and one presidential election have been held with some degree of competition (under the scrutiny of a reasonably robust press) but not enough, according to Quandt, to yet "legitimize governance or to challenge the positions of those in power."<sup>16</sup>

Morocco is not a case of reversal so much as stagnation. An opposition-led coalition served a full term of government between 1998 and 2002. If the king gradually yielded some powers, Morocco could very conceivably see a transition to democracy. Elections are routine and significant; despite the May 2003 bomb attacks in Casablanca, there is no major threat from Islamic fundamentalism; Morocco is not an oil-based rentier state; and the king could well help legitimize a transition (as Juan Carlos I did in Spain during the 1970s). Yet the king can still—by the constitution and by tolerated political practice—appoint and dismiss the prime minister and the cabinet. And he, not the government, actually appoints the "ministries of sovereignty" (justice, interior, defense, foreign relations, and religious affairs) as well as all governors and directors of major public agencies. Debates and challenges over the political prerogatives of the king (of the sort that contributed in the nineteenth century to the gradual emergence of European constitutional monarchies) were, as Abdeslam Maghraoui argues, actually more robust in 1962–75 than they are now. Thus, for Maghraoui, "it is likely that Morocco is no closer today to a decisive democratic breakthrough than it was four decades ago."<sup>17</sup>

## Theoretical and Political Implications

What are the implications of our findings? First, theoretically, we should be more cautious and nuanced than Western social scientists and public commentators have tended to be in ascribing the electoral gap of Muslim countries to the nature of Islam. If our two subsets of countries share the predominance of Islam in common, but differ sharply on so crucial a political measure as electoral competitiveness, then Islam cannot, by itself, explain the exceptionally low performance of one of them.

Second, that 7 of the 31 non-Arab Muslim-majority counties are clear "electoral overachievers" relative to GDPpc suggests that we ought to

rethink the “developmental thesis” in at least one respect: Electoral competition is clearly possible at low levels of development.<sup>18</sup> But it may be that in certain very poor countries, some actors might see control of the government as one of the few things that they can positively influence to improve their life. Survey research in India indicates the particular importance of elections for the very poor in that country, who unlike poor people in the United States, vote more frequently and feel more politically efficacious than the rich and better educated.

Third, all of the world’s religions are “multivocal” in the sense that they contain some doctrines and practices that are potentially *harmful*, and others that are potentially *beneficial*, to the emergence of democracy. A particularly beneficial doctrine in Islam is the Koranic injunction that “there shall be no compulsion in matters of religion.” Other potentially beneficial doctrines are the Islamic concepts of *shura* (consultation), *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), and *ijma* (consensus).<sup>19</sup> It would be an enormously significant research project that determined whether and how religious and political leaders in “electorally overachieving” states such as Senegal, Mali, Bangladesh, and Indonesia draw upon some of these democratically beneficial concepts. It might also be helpful to have a controlled comparison between two Arab countries which are not “rentier states,” and which also have relatively long histories as political communities, but which are not electorally competitive (Tunisia and Morocco) with two of the non-Arab Muslim-majority states to their immediate south (Mali and Senegal) that are electorally competitive.

Fourth, one of the oldest hypotheses in social science—dating back to John Stuart Mill—is that high levels of ethnolinguistic fragmentation are bad for democracy, or even for what this essay calls “electoral competitiveness.” Scholars have challenged this hypothesis, but much of the literature still argues at the very least that ethnolinguistic homogeneity is better than great diversity when it comes to peaceful electoral contestation. And yet if one divides the Muslim world into three parts—non-Arab electorally competitive countries, non-Arab electorally *non*competitive countries, and Arab countries (none of which are electorally competitive)—the relationship is the exact opposite of what the hypotheses would lead one to predict. The non-Arab countries that are electorally competitive began as politically independent countries with the highest levels of ethnolinguistic fragmentation of the three groups, and the noncompetitive Arab countries began with the lowest levels of ethnolinguistic fragmentation.

Based on data from the early 1960s, Charles Lewis Taylor and Michael Hudson created an influential, 136-country index of ethnolinguistic fragmentation. Of the 25 most-fragmented countries on this index, 8 were among the 12 non-Arab Muslim countries that Table 1 on p. 32 shows as having experienced three or more consecutive years of reasonably robust political and electoral rights between 1972 and 2000 (the ethni-

cally fragmented but electorally somewhat more competition-friendly line-up consisted of Senegal, Mali, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Niger, the Gambia, and Nigeria). Of the 11 Arab countries in the Taylor-Hudson index, *none* ranked among the world's 50 most-fragmented countries. Indeed, their average rank was 88 out of the whole set of 136, making them one of the *least*-fragmented sets of countries in the world.<sup>20</sup>

Fifth, if the findings of the present essay hold up when examined closely by scholars with a deep knowledge of the Middle East, then one may rule out high ethnolinguistic fragmentation, low scores on the Human Development Index, and Islam itself as causes of the Arab electoral deficit, certainly for *intra*-Muslim comparisons, and probably also for *crossnational* global comparisons as well. If these explanations are eliminated, then, how do we explain the Arab electoral deficit?

Most political cultures can and do change over time, because to some extent they are socially constructed by new opportunities, threats, and contexts generally. Witness Catholicism's prodemocratic transformation. Unless a compelling case can be made that there is something unique about Arab political culture that makes it permanently more inimical to electoral competitiveness than any other major political culture in the world, it seems likely that both theorists and policy makers will do better to search the *political*—as opposed to the ethnic or religious—particularities of the Middle East and North Africa for clues to the obdurately antidemocratic features of political life in those regions.<sup>21</sup>

What are these particularities? Modern democracies are territorially bounded entities, each of which extends to its citizens a particular set of rights and asks them to meet a particular set of obligations. Democracies are usually abetted by a strong affective attachment to, and identity with, the specific institutions and symbols of the political community within the country's boundaries. This is so whether the democracies in question are nation-states like France, Germany, Korea, Japan, and Portugal, or "state-nations" (a term that belongs in part to Juan Linz) such as Switzerland or India.

In sharp contrast to all this, many contemporary Arab states have relatively new and arbitrary boundaries because they were cut out of the Ottoman Empire, and were afterward occupied and often reconfigured as European colonies. The weakness of their "nation-state" or "state-nation" political identities has been compounded by the widespread use throughout the Middle East and North Africa of Arabic as the dominant language, and especially by attempts to privilege pan-Arabism (and more recently pan-Islamism) as core elements of national identities. Anyone even passingly familiar with the region will note how commonly used is the phrase "the Arab nation (*watan*)."

For many leaders of authoritarian Arab states, their proximity to, and involvement in, the geopolitical and military conflict with Israel (and Israel's major, often Western and democratic, allies) is a key aspect of

their—and the Middle East’s—distinctive political identity. This conflict, after all, is normally called the “Arab-Israeli” conflict. The United States contributes to the support of authoritarianism by subsidizing some Arab regimes such as that of Egypt (to the tune of at least 2 billion dollars a year) because it helps to buy peace with Israel or maintain U.S. geopolitical influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Arab countries are also politically distinctive in that they spend a substantially higher percentage of their GDP on security than do the countries of any other region of the world. Indeed Arab states spend three times as high a percentage as NATO countries (6.7 percent versus 2.2 percent). Furthermore, as Eva Bellin argues, the Middle East is “exceptional in that the Cold War’s end has not signaled Great Power retreat from patronage of authoritarianism, as has been the case in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere in the world.” She suggests as well that “the prevalence of interstate conflict . . . plays a role in reinforcing authoritarianism in the region.”<sup>22</sup>

If the international community were ever able to foster and support a peace in which Israel recognizes a viable and independent Palestinian state, and Palestine as well as most of the rest of the Arabic-speaking world recognizes Israel’s permanence and legitimacy, it is possible that Arab political culture—and the political exceptionalism that it expresses and helps to sustain—might begin to change. High military spending, authoritarianism, the world’s greatest concentration of traditional autocratic monarchies, and the willingness to sacrifice, or interfere with, national goals in the name of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, might well face increasing domestic opposition and find many fewer patrons than they attract today. Against the background of the broad comparative history of democratization, finally, one may also predict that in the end, it will be less any imposition from outside and more the force of internal pressures and initiatives—and let us hope that they are peaceful—which will contribute most decisively to the emergence of democracies in the Arab world.

## NOTES

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1. For a discussion of the minimum conditions of modern democracy, see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), ch. 1. According to Linz and Stepan, a polity must meet four conditions if it is to be considered a democracy: First, in order to organize elections and protect citizens’ rights there must be a “useable state.” Second, for elections to be free and fair there must be in place Robert Dahl’s seven “institutional guarantees,” assuring such political rights as freedom to organize and freedom of speech. Third, the elected government must be able to make major public policies and to appoint the most politically powerful officers (significant policies and appointments cannot be the “reserve domain” of such nonelected people or institutions as traditional monarchs or the military). Fourth, no matter how free the elections, and how large the majority, a government is not a democracy if it systematically violates the democratic constitution, the rule of law, and its citizens’ human rights.

2. *Polity IV Project*, Integrated Network for Societal Conflict Research (INSCR) Program, Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM), University of Maryland, College Park, [www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/inscri/polity](http://www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/inscri/polity).

3. See [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

4. Adrian Karatnycky, "The 2001 Freedom House Survey, Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 101. Across much of the globe, censuses showing religious affiliation are taken rarely, and then are often dogged by controversy and imprecision. While Karatnycky's list recommends itself for reasons of consistency across issues of the *Journal of Democracy*, one should state clearly that the combination of changing populations and long intervals between census enumerations makes naming all the countries where half or more of the people are Muslims a less-than-exact exercise in demographic science. Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria are frequent subjects of debate. It is worth noting that of these only the last—which is also Africa's most populous country—has experienced three or more consecutive years of "substantial political rights." Nigeria's last acceptable census (taken in 1953, seven years before independence) gauged the people to be 45 percent Muslim, 45 percent Christian, and 10 percent animist. Both Freedom House's most recent publications and the *CIA World Factbook* list Nigeria as a Muslim-majority country as of 2001. While some readers may dispute these findings, for reasons of consistency it seems reasonable to count Nigeria as a Muslim-majority country in the present essay.

5. Polity IV contains no data for Brunei or the Maldives.

6. Larry J. Diamond has reviewed three decades of literature on the debates surrounding the "developmental thesis" about the positive correlation between wealth and political competition. He concludes that the evidence broadly supports it. See Larry J. Diamond, "Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered," in Gary Marks and Larry J. Diamond, eds., *Reexamining Democracy: Essays in Honor of Seymour Martin Lipset* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992), 93–139.

7. Some scholars who read previous versions of this essay suggested using scores from the Human Development Index (HDI) rather than GDPpc as the key metric, but when this was done, the results remained essentially the same.

8. One of the reasons why Arab states are an exception to the developmental hypothesis is that many of them are "rentier states" that draw more than 50 percent of government budgets from nontax revenues such as oil. For an excellent discussion of this question see Michael L. Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53 (April 2001): 325–61. The oil factor is important, but fails to answer all of our questions about the Arab electoral deficit: Morocco and Tunisia, after all, receive just 10 and 17 percent of their respective budgets from sources other than taxes. Furthermore, two of the "electorally competitive" non-Arab Muslim-majority countries, Indonesia and Nigeria (the latter a rather "low-quality" competitive regime, it is true), are major oil producers.

9. On Turkey, see Soli Özel, "Turkey at the Polls: After the Tsunami," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (April 2003): 80–94, and Ziya Öniş and E. Fuat Keyman, "Turkey at the Polls: A New Path Emerges," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (April 2003): 95–107. On Mali, see Zeric Kay Smith, "Mali's Decade of Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (July 2001): 73–79. On Indonesia, see R. William Liddle, "Indonesia's Democratic Opening," *Government and Opposition* 34 (Winter 1999): 94–116. On Bangladesh, see the Report of the Non-Governmental Election Observers from Southeast Asia, *Governance and the Electoral Process in Bangladesh: Parliamentary Elections in 1996* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 1996).

10. Amanda Di Lorenzo and Enrico Sborgi, "The 1999 Presidential and Legislative Elections in Niger," *Electoral Studies* 20 (September 2001): 475. See also John Uniack

Davis and Aboubacar B. Kossomi, "Niger Gets Back on Track," *Journal of Democracy* 12 (July 2001): 80–87.

11. See Clement Nwankwo, "Monitoring Nigeria's Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 10 (October 1999): 156–65; and Rotimi T. Suberu, "Can Nigeria's New Democracy Survive?" *Current History* (May 2001): 207–12.

12. For what has, and has not, recently changed in these traditional monarchies see Michael Herb, "Emirs and Parliaments in the Gulf," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2003): 401–7; and Abdullah Juma Alhaj, "The Political Elite and the Introduction of Political Participation in Oman," *Middle East Policy* 7 (June 2000): 97–110.

13. For the international dimension to problems with democracy, "stateness," and political autonomy in Lebanon see the roundtable, "Lebanon and Syria: Internal and Regional Dimensions," *Middle East Policy* 8 (September 2001): 1–22; and Martha Kessler et al., "The PLO and the Lebanese Civil War," *Middle East Review* 9 (Fall 1976): 25; and Farid El-Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967–1976* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

14. See Russell Lucas, "Deliberalization in Jordan," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (January 2003): 137–44; and Ellen M. Lust-Okar, "The Decline of Jordanian Political Parties: Myth or Reality?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (November 2001): 545–69.

15. On Yemen, see Jillian Schwedler, "Yemen's Aborted Opening," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 48–55. On Egypt, see Jason Brownlee, "The Decline of Pluralism in Mubarak's Egypt," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 6–14.

16. William B. Quandt, "Algeria's Uneasy Peace," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 15, 19.

17. Abdeslam M. Maghraoui, "Depoliticization in Morocco," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 30. For the constitutional and political appointment prerogatives of the king, see Maghraoui's "Monarchy and Political Reform in Morocco," *Journal of Democracy* 12 (January 2001): 73–86.

18. It may not, however, be clear as to how stable such electoral competition is likely to be. See Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World: 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

19. For more on "multivocality" and the above-mentioned, and other, potentially democratically beneficial concepts in Islam see Alfred Stepan, "The World's Religious Systems and Democracy: Crafting the 'Twin Tolerations,'" in *Arguing Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 213–54 generally and especially 233–46.

20. See Charles Lewis Taylor and Michael C. Hudson, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 271–74. Readers should note that the Taylor-Hudson index may not fully reflect politically important religious conflicts among people from the same ethnic and linguistic group.

21. See Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East," unpublished manuscript, Harvard University, 2002.

22. This paragraph relies heavily on Eva Bellin's "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East." For comparative data on Arab military expenditures, soldiers per capita, and arms purchases, plus an analysis of the utility for the coercive apparatus of having an atmosphere of war, see F. Gregory Gause III, "Regional Influences on Experiments in Political Liberalization in the Arab World," in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Nobel, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1995), 283–306. See also the annual reports of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and of the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London.