

CARNEGIE
P A P E R S

**Middle East
Series**

**EVALUATING
MIDDLE EAST
REFORM**

**How Do We
Know When It
Is Significant?**

Marina Ottaway

**Democracy and
Rule of Law Project**



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

**Number 56
February 2005**

© 2005 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Carnegie Endowment. Please direct inquiries to:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-483-7600
Fax: 202-483-1840
www.CarnegieEndowment.org

This publication can be downloaded for free at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs. Limited print copies are also available. To request a copy, send an e-mail to pubs@CarnegieEndowment.org.

Carnegie Papers

Carnegie Papers present new research by Endowment associates and their collaborators from other institutions. The series includes new time-sensitive research and key excerpts from larger works in progress. Comments from readers are most welcome; please reply to the author at the address above or by e-mail to pubs@CarnegieEndowment.org.

About the Author

Marina Ottaway is senior associate in the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment. She is the coeditor of *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, and author of nine books, including *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*.

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
The Democratization Conundrum	5
The Idea of Paradigm Change	6
Assessing the Significance of Reforms	8
Analyzing Individual Countries	11
The Next Step	12

INTRODUCTION

This short paper launches the second set of studies in the Carnegie Papers Middle East Series. The first set, now also published as a book under the title *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, examined the most important issues concerning democracy promotion and democratic change in the Middle East. One of the conclusions that emerged from those studies is that the Middle East still offers a rather discouraging political picture. There are some liberalized autocracies but no democratic countries in the region. The link between economic and political reform remains weak. Democratic reformers have failed to build strong constituencies, and the organizations with strong constituencies are Islamist rather than democratic. The integration of Islamists in the reform process remains poor. And the United States, now championing democracy in the region, has little credibility in Arab eyes, and still has not consistently integrated democracy promotion in its policy toward the area. Yet, despite all these problems, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a ferment of reform in the Middle East. But how significant is it?

The second set of papers will try to answer that question through case studies of individual countries. Each case study will assess the reforms that have been introduced in a particular country. Are they meaningful reforms, as the governments claim, or are they simply placebos offered by still authoritarian regimes in an attempt to pacify domestic and international public opinion, as the opposition often argues? In other words, are the reforms significant or cosmetic? And if the reforms introduced so far are not significant, what steps would be? Answering these questions is a demanding task, because what constitutes significant rather than cosmetic change at any given moment varies from country to country, depending on the prevalent conditions and past experience. It is also an important task not only in trying to assess the significance of the change taking place, but also in helping policy makers focus their efforts.

“Significant” reform does not mean perfect reform. The goal of the case studies is not to provide a list of all the changes that each country would have to introduce in order to become a full-fledged democracy. Such an endeavor would be easy but essentially futile. A list of such changes could be readily derived from any textbook that discusses the characteristics of democratic systems. But we know that the process of democratization is slow and usually quirky, and that even a country that eventually democratizes successfully is most likely to start with very incomplete measures. The challenge is thus not to describe a perfect process that will almost certainly not take place, but to distinguish between partial steps that are significant because they start altering the distribution of power and the character of the political system and those that are only window dressing.

The following discussion seeks to clarify further the issues raised in this preface and to suggest parameters by which the significance of reforms can be judged, thus providing the conceptual framework for the case studies that will follow.

Most countries in the Middle East have experienced ferments of political reform over the past few years. At a time when the so-called third of wave of democratization has stalled in most parts of the

world, the Middle East may be moving slowly ahead. After sitting out the period of reform after the end of the Cold War, the Middle East seems to be opening up to the possibility of political change. There can be a lot of debate about the reasons for this new political vitality, particularly the relative importance of domestic factors and outside pressure, but the change is undeniable.

There is a new willingness on the part of most Arab governments to admit that some political change is needed. Even the most conservative among them are willing to say that Arab countries are bound to change politically, although in their own fashion and in their own time. Arab intellectuals are speaking up about the need for change more openly than before, although it is not clear whether the spirited discussions now taking place reach a broader and less elitist audience than that reached by the earlier, tamer exchanges of ideas. Debates about reform and democracy have become a growth industry in the Arab press. Democratic manifestos are being issued in rapid succession at meetings of civil society organizations, business groups, and even governments, creating a new and confusing array of declarations. In rapid succession, Arab organizations issued the Sanaa Declaration, the Alexandria Declaration, and the Beirut Declaration. These have been joined by innumerable statements about democracy from the Arab League, foreign ministers meeting with representatives of the G-8 in Rabat, and others.

The concrete steps taken by Arab governments to reform their political systems do not come even remotely close to matching the rhetoric, although some reform is taking place. Many of the signatories of the eloquent declarations issued by “civil society” are not organizations but individuals who work for or with the same governments they supposedly want to reform and from which they claim independence. Intellectuals engaging in the debate over democracy in the press are careful not to cross redlines that would bring down on them the ire of still intolerant regimes. Concrete change, in other words, remains extremely limited at best.

These contradictory trends make it difficult for analysts to judge the real extent of change in the region. Are Middle East countries experiencing the beginning of a real process of transformation that in due time may lead to the emergence of democratic systems in a region hitherto known for its authoritarianism or semi-authoritarianism? Or is all the talk a smokescreen to hide political stagnation, and are the modest steps being taken by some governments simply cosmetic reforms that seek to produce the impression of change without in the least altering the lopsided distribution of power to which Arab regimes owe their longevity?

The answers given to these questions from various quarters are usually more influenced by politics than by rigorous analysis. Many Arabs chafing under the control of unpopular regimes tend to dismiss all changes taking place in their countries or the region as purely cosmetic, and they resent the approval expressed by Western governments and organizations for the steps enacted by Arab regimes. Regime supporters portray even modest measures as momentous indications of change, and so does the George W. Bush administration, anxious to convince the American public that its policies are working and that U.S. pressure is turning the Middle East into a more democratic, hence less dangerous, region for the United States.

Is there a way of appraising in a more balanced, less blatantly political way the significance of the reform measures being enacted by Middle East regimes? This paper outlines an approach to reaching more systematic and dispassionate assessments of current trends. Two issues are addressed: first, what is the difference between significant and cosmetic reform in general? And second, how is it possible to ascertain in practice whether specific steps undertaken by a government or by the opposition are significant components of a process of democratization or merely cosmetic measures?

THE DEMOCRATIZATION CONUNDRUM

What makes it difficult to assess the significance of the reforms being enacted is that democratization is not an event but a process, usually quite lengthy—President Bush has described it in various speeches as a generational task. Even in retrospect, it is not always clear when and how the process started in a given country. When did the process of democratization start in the old democracies of Europe? With the signing of the Magna Carta? With the French Revolution? With the enclosure movement in Britain? Or when the voting franchise was extended beyond the narrow limits of the landowning class? And when did the United States become a democratic country? Volumes continue to be written on such issues. Even more recent and seemingly clear-cut examples, such as the transformation of Central Europe in the late 1980s and 1990s, are really not that simple. The fall of the Berlin Wall or the surge of crowds in Wenceslas Square in Prague were undoubtedly turning points, but they were not a beginning, because much had happened before. Furthermore, as Huntington convincingly argues, the beginning of a process of democratization is not always followed by success. Thus democratization may start with seemingly insignificant changes, while apparently significant changes may not lead anywhere.

The processes of gradual democratization are particularly difficult to analyze. In the case of Mexico, some analysts have chosen to interpret the transfer of power from the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, as the final outcome of a slow process of transformation that started in the early part of the twentieth century. The change, however, could just as plausibly be read as the result of a much more recent process triggered by the worldwide changes of the 1990s.

It is also clear from even the most superficial analysis that countries democratize in different ways: some more gradually, some suddenly; some as the result of deep socioeconomic change, others as the result of political upheaval. There may be some similarities in the final stages of the transformation in some countries, but there is certainly no universal pattern. Efforts to impose a standardized template on democracy promotion efforts during the 1990s have made this quite clear. The standardized models are more useful in helping democracy promoters organize and justify their interventions than in understanding how and why countries become or fail to become democratic.

Nor can the significance of specific reforms be judged on the basis of whether they are found in a checklist of the characteristics of a democratic system. The regular holding of multiparty elections, for example, is indisputably one characteristic of a democratic system, but plenty of countries have learned the art of holding multiparty elections without allowing a real challenge to the incumbent government. Such elections are not a sign of democratization. Equal rights for all citizens, and thus for women, are basic to the definition of a democratic system. Again, it is possible for an intelligent authoritarian ruler to make concessions on women's rights without bringing the country closer to democracy. In other words, we cannot judge the significance of reforms by comparing them to a checklist of what a democratic country must have. This is true both because countries can make a lot of progress toward democracy without scoring well on the checklist for a long time—the United States, for example, had moved far along the road to democracy before equal rights legislation was proposed—and because seemingly important reforms can be meaningless in the wrong context.

It is particularly important not to confuse all positive change taking place in a country with democratization. Economic reform does not automatically lead to democratization, and there can be a lot of democratization in countries where there is a lot of state control of and interference with the market, as the history of Western Europe after World War II shows. More recently,

China has introduced breathtaking economic reform without moving significantly in the direction of democracy. Singapore has educated its population, created a legal environment favorable to investment, and introduced many other positive changes, but it is not moving toward democracy; so far, we cannot even be sure that it is laying the groundwork for it. Indonesia, on the other hand, has seen some real change in the political realm in a socioeconomic environment that, by frequently used standards, is extremely unfavorable. Positive change can occur on many different fronts without democratization, and there can be democratization while other conditions are poor. The use of broad, imprecise terminology in discussing specific measures adopted by a country often confuses the issue of democratization. For example, it is clear that there can be no democracy without the rule of law, but not all laws are equally important for democracy. Although the revision of a country's investment code or the reform of divorce laws both fall broadly into the "rule of law" category, neither has much to do with democracy.

THE IDEA OF PARADIGM CHANGE

One way to approach the difficult problem of differentiating between significant and cosmetic reform is to borrow the concept of a paradigm shift from the world of the natural sciences. Thomas Kuhn has argued that major scientific advance is the result not of cumulative incremental change but of scientific revolutions that lead scientists to abandon the fundamental assumptions underlying their former work and to adopt a new paradigm, or set of assumptions, that looks at phenomena in a different light. It is these paradigm shifts that allow major progress to be made in the natural sciences.

The transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system requires a political paradigm shift, an abandoning by those controlling the government, but often also by their opponents, of old assumptions about the fundamental organization of the polity, the relation between the government and the citizens, and thus the source, distribution, and exercise of political power. Paradigm shifts do not always lead to democracy. The Russian Revolution entailed a paradigm shift with far-reaching implications. It affected not only the Russian empire but the way in which a vast array of political parties and movements worldwide thought about politics and government. It was most certainly not a shift toward democracy. Former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers brought about a political paradigm shift in Egypt that had repercussions throughout the Arab world, but again, democracy was not part of this shift. But while there can be and have been paradigm shifts without democracy, there can be no democracy that is not preceded by a paradigm shift.

Absent such a paradigm change, a country can still show some progress toward a less repressive political system without making real progress toward democracy. An authoritarian regime can become more benevolent—for example, by avoiding the most extreme forms of repression because it has concluded that they are counterproductive. A government may even liberalize a little, for example, by allowing a degree of criticism of the high officials in the press. As long as these changes are benevolent acts of the ruler rather than the recognition of inalienable political rights of the citizens, no paradigm change has taken place. The wave of post-Cold War political transitions provides numerous examples of political reforms without paradigm change, leading to the rise of semi-authoritarian regimes.

The idea of a paradigm shift as the central element of the process of democratization is rather different from the usual concept of how transitions occur that has been offered by students of

democratization and has been adopted by democracy promoters. In the more common approach, democratization is seen as a three-phase process: a period of liberalization, followed by a transition represented by the holding of competitive multiparty elections, followed finally by a prolonged period of democratic consolidation. The problem with this conceptualization of the process of democratization is that many countries experience a period of liberalization and hold competitive elections without truly democratizing. They erect the façade of democracy but not the building behind it, and become what I have called elsewhere semi-authoritarian countries. These are countries that have not experienced a paradigm shift but have simply superimposed the formal processes expected by the international community on the old assumptions about how power is generated and exercised.

A paradigm shift can occur at any stage of the formal process of transformation. For some countries, such as the Czech Republic, the paradigm shift took place at the very beginning of the process. For many other countries, such as Ukraine, the paradigm shift occurs only long after the country experiences the formal transition represented by multiparty elections.

Paradigm shift does not mean revolutionary change, although this occurs in extreme cases. Rather, it means the abandoning of old assumptions that were once taken for granted. Recognizing freedom of association in a country that had none can be the beginning of a paradigm change, even if newly formed organizations do not have yet the capacity to challenge and defeat the incumbent government. The rapid collapse of the socialist regime in the 1989 “velvet revolution” in Czechoslovakia is an example of paradigm change, but so is the much slower and less dramatic process that made it possible for the opposition to win elections in Mexico in 2000 after sixty-eight years of unshakable PRI rule. Indeed, it would be difficult to put a precise date on when the paradigm shift took place in that country. Nor does a paradigm change always lead to regime change in the short run, or even to a peaceful change. It may take a long time between the introduction of meaningful reforms, for example the holding of truly free, multiparty elections, and a victory by new political parties.

What leads to political paradigm shifts? In the Middle East, the dominant assumption is that only incumbent regimes have the power to launch a meaningful reform process. The assumption is widely shared by Arab governmental and nongovernmental elites and important segments of the public and is eagerly embraced by outsiders who want to promote democracy without risking destabilization, including U.S. government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. On the part of Arab groups, the assumption is based on a mixture of political prudence and cultural traits. People who live in authoritarian countries have by definition little experience with grassroots organizing and are used to seeing the government as the source of all problems as well as all solutions. Although most Arab countries have known periods of some political openness and, outside the Gulf states, have some experience with democratization, citizens tend to look at the authorities for solutions; those who do not are more likely to advocate violent, radical change than incremental reform. But the focus on change from the top is also the result of political expediency for many Arabs, as it is for many Westerners. Change from the top would protect the interests of citizens for whom the status quo is morally reprehensible but materially safe and even rewarding. Change from the top would also safeguard the interests of foreign countries that are interested in stability and advocate democracy not as a means to bring about sweeping change, which can be dangerous, but as a means to create mildly reformist regimes deemed to be more flexible and thus more stable than authoritarian ones.

The focus on the reforms introduced by the government is justified in the sense that ultimately, a change in the political paradigm of a country requires action by the government, whether the old or the new one, because it is the government that can change the rules of the political game and enact a new system. Even in the rare cases where political change takes a revolutionary form, the new system is established by those who seized control of the state, and thus control of governing. But political change that affects the distribution of power in a country rarely comes solely at the initiative of the government, from the top down without any prompting. Reform is usually a response to pressures within the society that make change imperative. In assessing the significance of the changes taking place in a country, it is thus important to look not only at the initiatives taken by the government but also at actions by nongovernmental actors, such as political parties, organizations, social movements, and labor unions, that may affect the balance of power in a country and put real pressure on the government to reform. Not all steps taken by such independent organizations are significant in terms of democratic change; there are a lot of cosmetic activities here as well. The growth of political parties with a large membership is undoubtedly a significant change. The signing of a manifesto on democracy by a small number of intellectuals is very unlikely to be the trigger for a political paradigm change.

Until the end of the Cold War, and even more recently in the Arab world, a discussion of reform from the top and pressure from below would have exhausted the possibilities about the sources of paradigm change. At present, with the issue of political reform in the Arab world high on the agenda of the United States and the European Union, the question also needs to be asked whether the change of political paradigm in a country can be the result of external pressure or even of carefully designed programs to bring about such change. Events of the last few years make it quite clear that external pressure can easily trigger cosmetic reform. This is particularly true for pressure exercised by the United States. Arab regimes by and large have been quite responsive to U.S. pressure and have introduced changes particularly in those areas where U.S. pressure, or at least U.S. rhetoric, has been strongest. Many countries are trying to refurbish their reformist credentials by amending family codes to improve the rights of women, or by appointing women to important, visible positions. Some are experimenting with at least local elections, although usually in such a way that makes it extremely unlikely, if not outright impossible, that parties or groups hostile to the government in power will acquire control. What we have not witnessed so far is any example of outside pressure convincing the incumbent government to expose itself to competition that might result in its ouster from power. Nor is it clear whether the United States and other outsiders pushing for reform really want to see the enactment of measures that could lead to a political paradigm change with unforeseeable consequences. It is possible that modest, even cosmetic, change at this point accommodates the political requirements of both incumbent governments and outsiders better than more far-reaching measures.

ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REFORMS

Defining reforms that could lead to paradigm change as significant and those that do not as cosmetic does not answer the question of how to distinguish between the two in practice.

Several problems arise in judging the significance of reforms in practice. The first is the time frame. Reforms should be judged on the basis of the likelihood that they will make a difference in a

relatively short period of time. It is true that democratization is a long process, and that democratic consolidation takes decades at best. But in judging the significance of specific steps supposedly taken by governments or opposition to facilitate democratization, it is necessary to use a much shorter time frame. Presumably, if a government is committed to democratic change, it will take steps that have an effect in the short run, not in the distant future. Although any precise number would be arbitrary here, reforms that are not likely to have an impact within five years or so should not be considered significant. For example, the amendment of a party registration law that may have an impact on elections scheduled four or five years in the future should be considered significant because it could contribute to change in the distribution of power, and thus to paradigm change, in the foreseeable future. But the appointment of younger ministers or the promotion to high positions of younger officials of a ruling party cannot be considered a significant sign of change solely on the ground that it indicates the rise of a new generation that at some point will take it upon itself to reform the system. The time frame is simply too long, and the supposed process of generational change too vague, to see such appointments and promotions as indications that change is indeed underway.

The second problem is whether a measure has a direct impact on political reform or whether it would become significant only if all parts of a chain of events fell into place. For example, the lifting of emergency laws to free up political activity is undoubtedly a significant reform, and the formation of a coalition of political parties a significant step taken by the opposition. Both could lead to paradigm change in the foreseeable future. The privatization of state industry, on the other hand, cannot be considered significant from the point of view of political paradigm change because the political impact of such a measure would at best be indirect and contingent on many other pieces falling into place. If privatization were honestly conducted and led to real economic growth, if economic growth were of such a nature that it facilitated the formation of a large middle class rather than the emergence of a small number of robber barons, and if the process continued long enough, in the end, pressure for political paradigm change could develop. But there are too many uncertainties and contingencies in the chain to allow the analyst to define privatization as a significant step toward political paradigm change.

Finally, there is the problem of unintended consequences and the “slippery slope.” Reform processes that start out as limited and carefully orchestrated from the top may have unintended consequences leading to a paradigm change at some point. The repression of the Prague Spring in 1968 triggered a series of reactions that are indirectly connected to the velvet revolution of 1989. Yet, it would make little sense to see the repression of the Prague Spring as the beginning of democratization in Czechoslovakia. Again, there are too many contingencies and intervening variables in the slippery slope scenario.

Significant political changes are thus those that have a direct, short-term impact on political activity in a country, and thus have the potential to lead to a paradigm shift in a time period that is not so as long to be completely unpredictable or through a process that does not require an endless chain of intervening variables to fall into place. To be sure, it is only in retrospect that it becomes clear whether reforms have led to paradigm change. The observer of contemporary phenomena has to be content with evaluating the potential for change, knowing full well that it will not be automatically realized. Furthermore, not all significant reforms are relevant to democratization. Reforms that could lead to democracy must favor the emergence of a political system that, following Robert Dahl’s definition in *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, is responsive, or almost completely responsive, to its citizens, allowing them to formulate and express preferences, and to

have those preferences weighed equally with no discrimination because of their content or sources. Focusing on responsiveness rather than on institutional arrangements as the defining characteristic of a democracy makes it easier to separate changes that are steps toward democracy from those that are purely formal. For example, the question is not simply whether elections are held regularly in a given country, but whether such elections lead to the formation of responsive governments that are not all-powerful and thus are obliged to respond to the demands of their constituents in order to continue in office.

Significant, political paradigm-changing democratic reforms are thus those that affect, or at least have the potential for affecting, the distribution of power in a country and to make power subject to a popular mandate. They must contribute to limiting the power of the executive, allowing the emergence of other centers of power and introducing an element of pluralism. The countries of the Middle East at the present time are characterized by an extraordinary concentration of power in the hands of an executive—a king, a ruling family, a religious establishment, a strong president. This is the fundamental problem of democracy in the entire region. The only true exceptions at this point are Lebanon, where power is allocated—both constitutionally and in political reality—among different political institutions and religious communities, and Iraq, where U.S. intervention has destroyed the strongman paradigm but no political system capable of generating power has emerged, leaving a power vacuum, violence, and instability.

The changes in the distribution of power and thus in the responsiveness of the political system do not have to be complete or even particularly extensive for specific changes or reforms to be considered significant. Certainly, a new political paradigm does not have to be elaborated in order for change to be considered significant. Even in the natural sciences, the shift starts with the challenging of the old assumptions, not with the consolidation of a new model.

In conclusion, significant reforms are those that have the potential for leading to a democratic paradigm shift in a fairly short time period, without the intervention of a long chain of intervening variables that may or may not materialize, and equally without the intervention of unforeseen circumstances. Although the possibility that a complex chain of events will lead to democratization cannot be ruled out, or that apparently insignificant change will put the country on a slippery slope toward major transformation, we can not judge the significance of specific reforms by assuming that such a chain of events will unfold. Significant reform can occur from the top down, if a government enacts measures that start breaking down its monopoly over power. But significant change can also occur from the bottom up, when strong new organizations with a political agenda form. Ideally, that political agenda should be a democratic one, but even the growth of a political organization with an agenda that falls short of democracy can be important in breaking down the power of the old regime. A country where a nondemocratic government is being challenged by other political forces, even if they do not embrace a democratic agenda, is closer to pluralism than one in which a government is unchallenged or weakly challenged. Anything that leads to autonomous activities and organizing is part of the process of breaking down power at the core.

Even significant reforms, however, may not in the end lead to a paradigm change and democratization. In assessing the significance of reforms, analysts cannot predict the ultimate outcome of a long-term process because too many new factors can intervene. Analysts can only try to ascertain whether the steps taken at a given time are significant, and thus have the potential to contribute to democratization. Assessing present significance does not mean predicting future

outcomes. For example, a constitutional amendment that increases the power of the parliament is a significant measure, although in the future its potential for changing the balance of power in the country may be voided by electoral maneuvering that ensures that the ruling party controls the overwhelming majority of the seats. The decision to allow political parties to register is significant, although there is no guarantee that those parties will succeed in developing strong constituencies. The fact that there is no guarantee that a reform introduced by the government, or an initiative introduced by independent organizations, will eventually lead to paradigm change does not mean that such reforms and initiatives should be dismissed as purely cosmetic changes. As long as the potential for paradigmatic change exists, reforms should initially be given the benefit of the doubt.

Cosmetic reforms are measures that do not affect the distribution of power, do not make the government more open to challenges, and thus do not have the potential for leading directly to paradigm change. Furthermore, cosmetic reforms are deliberately designed to give the appearance of change while precluding its possibility. When a government decides to allow the election of half the members of parliament while maintaining the right to appoint the other half, it is carrying out a cosmetic reform.

Cosmetic reforms may be introduced more often in response to the pressure of the international community when domestic pressure is still limited. Confronted with the mobilization of significant domestic constituencies, governments are more likely either to resort to repression or to introduce significant change. It is the distant actors that may be satisfied with façade changes.

ANALYZING INDIVIDUAL COUNTRIES

An assessment of whether a particular measure is significant depends not only on the nature of the measure itself, but also on the context in which it is enacted. The same reform can be very significant in one country and virtually meaningless in another. For example, the holding of local government elections could be a significant step toward reform in Saudi Arabia if the government allowed a degree of competition and thus gave voters meaningful choices; in the context of that country, where power comes from the top and is closely guarded by the royal family and the religious establishment, any form of popular participation would be meaningful change. But in a country like Egypt, where popular political participation is not a novel idea (although the government has limited it in practice), reintroducing the election of village *omdah* or chiefs could only be interpreted as an attempt by government to distract attention from the real problem, the election of the president.

Assessing the significance of reforms thus requires not the compiling of a checklist of measures that have the potential for leading to a political paradigm change in general, but a country-by-country analysis of what would constitute significant reform under the present circumstances. Which reforms introduced by the government have the potential to lead to a change in the distribution of power, allowing more groups to become political players and thus increasing the pluralism of the system? Which steps taken by opposition groups represent a break with patterns of co-optation and accommodation? There are considerable differences among the political systems of Arab countries at present, although they are all authoritarian to some degree. The political systems of Saudi Arabia and Algeria, for example, have virtually nothing in common, and neither do those of Egypt and Kuwait. Even countries that outsiders tend to group together—the Gulf monarchies, or the Maghreb

countries—are quite different. The process of democratization, if it takes place, is bound to be different in each country. This means that the significance of reforms needs to be assessed for each country. It also means that outsiders seeking to promote democracy in the area need to deal with each country separately, rather than to promote regional initiatives that by definition cannot address the particularities of each situation.

An assessment of what would constitute meaningful reform in each country should thus start with an analysis of the situation that exists at the present time, in terms of the characteristics of the political system, the distribution of power as it is in practice rather than in theory, the main obstacles to transformation, and possible sources of change. But such an assessment should not aim at describing or prescribing all the steps that a country would need to take to become democratic. Meaningful reform, as pointed out earlier, need not entail complete transformation, because complete transformation simply does not take place quickly. And here lies the real challenge for analysts: it is easy to list all the changes that need to take place in a country before it can be considered a democracy; everybody knows what the characteristics of a democratic system are. It is much more difficult to judge the significance of the partial, piecemeal changes that take place in a specific country and that may or may not lead to a paradigm change in the long term.

For advocates of democratization, particularly domestic advocates who passionately want to see change in their own countries, the idea of accepting modest, incomplete steps is unattractive. Indeed, advocates of democracy should be pressing for complete change, for the real thing, not for modest, piecemeal steps. It is not for advocates to take a long-term view and step back. The job of the analyst, however, is not to prescribe ultimate outcomes but to understand as much as possible the process that is unfolding and the trends that are developing in a country, and such process and trends are made up of partial reforms and incomplete steps, some significant and some probably simply cosmetic.

THE NEXT STEP

The ideas set forth in this paper—a working paper in the true sense of the term—are meant as the groundwork for a series of country assessments that Carnegie's Middle East Policy Reform Initiative will be carrying out and commissioning over time. In keeping with the ideas developed here, these studies will seek to evaluate the changes taking place in the most important Arab countries at this time, and also to suggest what measures that could conceivably be adopted by regimes in power now could make a difference. Again in keeping with the ideas set forth here, the papers will not advocate complete transformation now, but, more modestly, will deal simply with steps that are already being taken or discussed in the countries under consideration. To impatient advocates of change in their own countries, the papers will undoubtedly appear far too modest. To foreign advocates of democracy who see democratization as a long-term, generational process, the papers may offer some help in assessing whether Arab countries are moving toward a new paradigm or simply going through the motions of reform while staying firmly in place.

ABOUT THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the United States. Founded in 1910, Carnegie is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.

Through research, publishing, convening, and, on occasion, creating new institutions and international networks, Endowment associates shape fresh policy approaches. Their interests span geographic regions and the relations between governments, business, international organizations, and civil society, focusing on the economic, political, and technological forces driving global change.

Through its Carnegie Moscow Center, the Endowment helps to develop a tradition of public policy analysis in the former Soviet Republics and to improve relations between Russia and the United States. The Endowment publishes *Foreign Policy*, one of the world's leading magazines of international politics and economics, which reaches readers in more than 120 countries and in several languages.

For more information about the Carnegie Endowment visit www.CarnegieEndowment.org.

The Democracy and Rule of Law Project analyzes efforts by the United States and members of the international community to promote democracy worldwide. The project also examines the state of democracy around the world, looking at patterns of success and failure in transitions to democracy. Most recently, it has launched a special effort to analyze the problems of democracy in the Middle East and the challenges the United States faces in its new attempt to promote democracy in that region.

The project also publishes the *Arab Reform Bulletin*, a timely, incisive, and objective e-monthly that analyzes political developments in the Middle East. Each issue features original work from authors in the region, United States, and Europe. Read current and back issues at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/ArabReform.

The Democracy and Rule of Law Project is part of the Endowment's **Global Policy Program**, which addresses the policy challenges arising from the globalizing processes of economic, political, and technological change. The program recognizes that globalization, though by nature a universalizing phenomenon, extends around the world unevenly, producing sharply varied effects, both positive and negative. The program focuses on integrating the emerging global policy agenda with traditional security concerns, and also seeks to increase public understanding of globalization.

For more about Carnegie's Democracy and Rule of Law Project, visit www.CarnegieEndowment.org/democracy.

Carnegie Papers

2005

56. *Evaluating Middle East Reform: How Do We Know When It Is Significant?* (M. Ottaway)
55. *Competing Definitions of the Rule of Law: Implications for Practitioners* (R. K. Belton)

2004

54. *E.U.–Russia Relations: Interests and Values —A European Perspective* (R. Schuette)
53. *The Political-Economic Conundrum: The Affinity of Economic and Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* (E. Bellin)
52. *Political Reform in the Arab World: A New Ferment?* (A. Hawthorne)
51. *Cambodia Blazes a New Path to Economic Growth and Job Creation* (S. Polaski)
50. *Integrating Democracy Promotion into the U.S. Middle East Policy* (M. Dunne)
49. *Islamists in the Arab World: The Dance around Democracy* (G. Fuller)
48. *Democracy and Constituencies in the Arab World* (M. Ottaway)
47. *Development and Foreign Investment: Lessons Learned from Mexican Banking* (J. Steinfeld)
46. *Deterring Conflict in the Taiwan Strait: The Successes and Failures of Taiwan's Defense Reform and Modernization Program* (M. Swaine)
45. *Europe's Uncertain Pursuit of Middle East Reform* (R. Youngs)
44. *Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?* (A. Hawthorne)
43. *Small Enterprises and Economic Policy* (A. Åslund, S. Johnson)
42. *Women's Rights and Democracy in the Arab World* (M. Ottaway)

2003

41. *Beyond Rule of Law Orthodoxy: The Legal Empowerment Alternative* (S. Golub)
40. *Strengthening Linkages between U.S. Trade Policy and Environmental Capacity Building* (J. Audley, V. Ulmer)
39. *Is Gradualism Possible? Choosing a Strategy for Promoting Democracy in the Middle East* (T. Carothers)
38. *Verifying North Korean Nuclear Disarmament* (J. Wolfsthal, F. McGoldrick, S. Cheon)
37. *Liberalization versus Democracy: Understanding Arab Political Reform* (D. Brumberg)
36. *The Enlargement of the European Union: Consequences for the CIS Countries* (A. Åslund, A. Warner)
35. *Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The Problem of U.S. Credibility* (M. Ottaway)
34. *Promoting the Rule of Law Abroad: The Problem of Knowledge* (T. Carothers)
33. *The Other Face of the Islamist Movement* (M. Kamel Al-Sayyid)

2002

32. *China's WTO Commitment on Independent Judicial Review: An Opportunity for Political Reform* (V. Mei-Ying Hung)
31. *Fire in the Hole: Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Options for Counterproliferation* (M. Levi)
30. *Mythmaking in the Rule of Law Orthodoxy* (F. Upham)
29. *Enhancing Nuclear Security in the Counter-Terrorism Struggle: India and Pakistan as a New Region for Cooperation* (R. Gottemoeller, R. Longworth)
28. *Do Judicial Councils Further Judicial Reform? Lessons from Latin America* (L. Hambergren)
27. *A New Equation: U.S. Policy toward India and Pakistan after September 11* (L. Feinstein, J. Clad, L. Dunn, D. Albright)
26. *Foreign Direct Investment: Does the Rule of Law Matter?* (J. Hewko)
25. *Politics and Parallel Negotiations: Environment and Trade in the Western Hemisphere* (J. Audley, E. Sherwin)
24. *Russian Basic Science after Ten Years of Transition and Foreign Support* (I. Dezhina, L. Graham)

For a complete list of Carnegie Papers, go to www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs.