



POMED

PROJECT
ON MIDDLE EAST
DEMOCRACY

www.pomed.org • 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 300 • Washington, DC 20009

“Upcoming Elections in Bahrain: Can the Stalemate Be Broken in Time?”

Project on Middle East Democracy

Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

Thursday June 5, 2014, 10:00am-11:30am

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

1179 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC

On Tuesday June 5, 2014, the Project on Middle East Democracy and Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain co-hosted an event entitled “Upcoming Elections in Bahrain: Can the Stalemate Be Broken in Time?” The discussion featured **Matar Ibrahim Matar**, from the National Assembly of Bahrain and a former member of the Bahraini Parliament, **Dr. Dafna H. Rand**, Deputy Director of Studies and Leon Panetta Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, and **Les Campbell**, Senior Associate and Regional Director for MENA programs at the National Democratic Institute. The conversation was moderated by **Stephen McInerney**, Executive Director of the Project on Middle East Democracy.

Matar Ibrahim Matar began by providing background on Bahrain and its government, speaking first about an al-Wefaq human rights report that described crimes against humanity, such as the torture of detainees. There are more than 7,000 detainees in Bahrain, noting that in targeted areas of the country, one in ten Bahrainis have experienced detention. The abundance of these abuses, Matar says, place Bahrain as the third worst country in the Middle East in terms of human rights abuses, a fact demonstrated in the country’s rapidly declining democratic status, according to the Index of Democracy. Bahrain’s prime minister, who has been in power since the early 1970s, appoints the Upper House as well as the Council of Supreme Judiciary. The PM can also assign citizenship and grant land without constraint, allowing him to manage the demography of Bahrain. Furthermore, the Crown Prince has not compromised for political representation of Bahrainis. Matar went on to say that all leaders of the opposition party al-Wefaq are currently under trial, showing that the government is “shutting all doors.” However, al-Wefaq says they are ready for the transition, and that there is an agreement in place on a roadmap to reform. Next, Matar spoke on potential policy recommendations for the U.S. government to take to move forward. He suggested that if the U.S. can push reforms, Bahrain could serve as a regional model for democracy promotion. As it is time for the ruling family to call on the prime minister to step down, Matar believes the U.S. must cease recognizing him in an attempt to isolate the regime. He suggests that if the U.S. can confront the likes of Russia, then it can confront Bahrain. Matar stressed the urgency of action in Bahrain in light of problems such as sectarian tensions, growing national debt, increasing violence, and terrorism.

Dr. Dafna H. Rand spoke next, first making the case for U.S. involvement in Bahrain and then describing two different “forks” which U.S. foreign policy towards Bahrain could follow. She explained that “there are many reasons why it makes strategic sense” for the U.S. to invest in diplomacy in Bahrain. The first ‘fork’ thinks in the short term. She outlined a number of reasons short term involvement would be beneficial. First, terrorism showed the Bahraini government that time “was not on their side.” Second, modest reconciliation would have positive repercussions for resolving other partially sectarian conflicts. She described how “a lot of sectarianism in the Arab Spring has been manufactured

from the top,” and depicted reconciliation in Bahrain as a possibility to show that sectarianism is “not embedded in the DNA of the Middle East.” Third, al-Wefaq should participate even if their needs are not all met, as it would empower Shi’a members in the Bahraini government. Rand said that if al-Wefaq earns even just a few seats in parliament, they will become “the people the U.S. government looks to work with.” The second ‘fork’ thinks in the long term and ponders how much long-term leverage the U.S. government actually has beyond arm sales, to influence transition internally. In this respect, there has been some degree of success by the U.S. government with bureaucratic reforms.

Les Campbell spoke last, emphasizing that “this has been done before,” as the same things were said in 2002 about accepting undemocratic constituencies. He believes that compromise should be advocated. He suggests that it is better to accept limited powers, like when land reform was examined during the limited opening by parliament, but was then shut down by the government when the government realized that it was giving parliamentary members independence to interact with foreigners. A law was then passed prohibiting international actors to come in and interact with parliament without approval of the government. However, fair action should be pushed, as events of the Arab Spring gave every country the motivation to have election observers. Although elections are still “farcical,” like in Egypt, the rigging of elections is more obvious. In conclusion, Campbell says the National Democracy Institute is “extremely skeptical and probably cynical” towards prospects for reform because the Bahraini government has always closed openings.

Stephen McInerney began the Q&A section by asking each panelist a question. First he asked Matar what the opposition needs in order to make progress. Matar suggests they want to be part of the negotiation process, which currently is nonexistent. Next he asked Dr. Rand who exactly in the current administration would make the decision to get involved in Bahrain, and how would they do it. She first reiterated the debate of how invested should the U.S. be in brokering agreements. She then recommends that someone from the State Department should be paired with someone from the Defense Department, and with White House support they should travel to Bahrain and speak on Bahrain policy, while not dictating policy. However, she stresses that scrutiny towards potential human rights violations should continue. McInerney asked Campbell what the international community could have done differently. Campbell suggests that it is and was counterproductive to make recommendations of governance to other countries. He also noted, near the close of the event, that he has “skepticism” towards the potential for possible change because “all of the same leaders are still in place.” Answering a question on the influence of opposition participation changing the power dynamics, Matar noted that the government always chooses Sunni representatives that do not necessarily represent the Sunni community in Bahrain; the majority of Sunnis are looking for an opening to act upon. Addressing a question on opposition participation, Campbell says that the involvement of the opposition would serve to marginalize the real centers of power like the president and PM, and thus have a positive short-term effect.

On the question of potential U.S. policies towards Bahrain, panelists discussed the role of the U.S. 5th Naval Fleet as well as past actions on the part of the embassy. While McInerney said the implications of the Fleet as being mixed, Matar described the Fleet as decidedly “negative” for Bahrain’s potential reforms. Citing Sarah Chayes of the Carnegie Endowment, he said that the 5th Fleet is a “shield for Kleptocracy” in Bahrain. He also emphasized the importance of the U.S. having a clear, widely known policy on Bahrain. Rand said the U.S. Embassy has been doing a good job “being in the room” with different actors in the political process. Les Campbell said the U.S. government has failed the Bahraini people by not condemning laws which violate human rights.