

SCANDALOUS CINEMA

The sheer amount of sexual innuendo and revealing clothing in last year's Egyptian film *Seven Playing Cards* shocked many. Egypt's censorship committee deleted over half the movie's scenes, including one in which the star, the Egyptian singing sensation Ruby, danced alone in a nightgown. The censored film was a flop in theaters, but Showtime Arabia picked up the rights to the uncensored version.

Other Middle Eastern films have been pushing—or even far surpassing—the boundaries of political and social correctness. The Lebanese-Egyptian film *Dunia* (World) contained graphic depictions not just of poverty, but also of nudity. The film and its star, Hannan Turk, were criticized for the film's frank discussion of female genital mutilation. Turk called her role "the cry of every Egyptian girl who suffered" the operation.

Political and social issues have similarly made it onto the silver screen. Several years ago, Dream TV drew the ire of many after its open discussion of female sexuality, including female masturbation. Now, the first Palestinian soap opera, *Seriously Joking*, tackles personal issues like early marriage, high unemployment, nepotism, corruption and emigration. It is too early to tell whether the Arabic-dubbed version of *The Simpsons* will be a hit. References to beer have been deleted, but producers hope that images of a bumbling father and his disrespectful children will translate into popularity. ■ -NI

SHOULD THE PARTY BE OVER?

By Jon B. Alterman

There is a certain logic to the idea that political change in the Middle East should go through political parties. Parties have leaders, activists, and agendas. They are wonderful at mobilizing people for a common purpose. They have been successful pushing democracy around the world, from Eastern Europe to South Africa to East Asia. They may not be the best way forward in the Middle East, however.

The conclusion of Egypt's parliamentary elections last week helped prove that point. The ruling National Democratic Party did remarkably well, winning some 70 percent of the seats. The next runner up was not a party at all, but rather the Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptian law prohibits religiously oriented parties, so Brotherhood candidates (who in years past competed as members of the Labor Party) ran as independents, under the common slogan of "Islam is the Solution." Its candidates contested only one third of the seats in the Egyptian Parliament, and in early rounds they took two-thirds of them.

If one were to do some quick math, it would seem that the results left little space at all for Egypt's formal opposition political parties. In fact, that is exactly the case. Despite uniting for the purpose of the campaign, these eleven parties and opposition groups combined took perhaps a dozen of 444 seats.

The issue in Egypt is not that everyone supports the government. The fact that the Brotherhood candidates did so well where they competed is a clear indication of that. The issue, instead, has to do with the way parties work.

The ruling party in Egypt, like ruling parties in many authoritarian countries, is an all-encompassing force in society. The line between party and state is often obscure, and decisions that are taken by local, regional or national officials in other countries are reserved to the party in Egypt. In its current incarnation, the party has no real ideology, and membership essentially boils down to a question of access to resources.

In this environment, opposing the party is a perilous game. In a narrow sense, not having party membership means losing access to resources reserved for party members. More point-

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MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE SERIES

On November 18, the CSIS Middle East Program held the first session in its Maghreb Roundtable Series. November's roundtable, entitled "Democrats or Autocrats?: Islamists in North African Politics," featured Michael Willis, from Oxford University and Malika Zeghal, from the University of Chicago. Noting the power that North African regimes hold over the political sphere, Zeghal argued that Islamists could be either democrats or autocrats, depending on the government-imposed constraints. Willis suggested that Maghrebi governments continue to show no indication that they would be willing to share power with any other political force, including Islamists. The second Maghreb roundtable will focus on Civil Society and Democratization in North Africa and will be held December 16. To read summaries of prior roundtables or for more information about the program, visit <http://www.csis.org/mideast/maghreb>. ■

edly, however, opposing the party means that one gives up many of the privileges and protections in society one would otherwise take for granted. In exchange for loyalty, opposition parties scarcely have anything to give, because patronage is so deeply tied to the state, which dispenses it through party organs.

Where the parties do have support, it is often not because of their ideas, but because of their leaders. Fouad Serag El-Din was a prominent minister in the Wafd Party in the 1940s and 1950s, and he presided over the party when it was resurrected in 1976. Even into his eighties he continued to preside over the weakening party, and he left little behind upon his death. Khaled Mohieddin's family has been prominent in the Qalyubia Province for generations, and he represented his village for 15 years as the head of the leftist Tagammu' Party. The village's support was for him rather than his ideas, though. This year, the 83 year-old Mohieddin lost his reelection bid to Muslim Brother Taymour Abdel-Ghani Sadeq.

The grand old men of Egypt's party system no longer command respect, and their parties command no cash. New parties are in even greater crisis. Ayman Nour, a 41 year-old upstart member of Parliament who launched his Ghad Party last year, lost his most recent election and now watches events unfold from his jail cell, where he sits accused of corruption.

The Muslim Brotherhood has at least three things going for it as an agent of change. First, by avoiding registration as a party they have avoided being hobbled by the rules that the state imposes on political parties. Second, it has managed to come across as simultaneously patriotic and in opposition. What external support it gets comes entirely from the Arab world, which is far more palatable to most Egyptians than taking money from Western governments and organizations affiliated with them.

Finally, the Muslim Brotherhood's focus has been on changing society, perhaps even more than on changing the state. Through their social and educational programs, they have an ability to reward their followers and to build loyalty. In the Brotherhood's social activities, often closely tied to the mosque, the Egyptian state has been far more permissive. The Brotherhood's political gains have been a partial consequence.

There is little reason to think that the Brotherhood's core support surpasses the 25 percent or so that religious parties enjoy in most Arab states where they are allowed to compete. Their strong showing in this election partly reflected their strong organization and the fact that overall turnout was less than 25 percent of registered voters (and an even smaller percentage of eligible ones). In addition, they benefited from the protest vote.

The Brotherhood's greatest success, however, is understanding that formal politics are only a small piece of the puzzle of working toward political change in Egypt. The formal channels—represented by political party life—are sterile and heavily controlled. They seek to change the Egyptian government by changing Egypt. Those who are opposed both to the status quo and the Brotherhood should take note. ■ 12/13/05

Links of Interest

Program Director Jon B. Alterman's recent article in *Foreign Service Journal*, "IT Comes of Age in the Middle East:"

http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060101_it_and_mideast.pdf

On December 8, Program Director Jon B. Alterman and CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction Program Co-director Rick Barton gave a media briefing on the Iraqi parliamentary elections. A highlighted transcript of that briefing is available on the CSIS website:

http://www.csis.org/media/csis/events/051208_iraqbriefing.pdf

On November 9, Program Director Jon B. Alterman spoke at a conference called "Where Goes the Libya Model" at the American Enterprise Institute:

<http://www.aei.org/events/eventID.1181/summary.asp>

Program Director Jon B. Alterman's recent article in *Middle East Quarterly*, "The Unique Libyan Case:"

http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060101_libyan_case.pdf

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