



**Mediterranean Programme**  
**10th Mediterranean Research Meeting**

Florence & Montecatini Terme 25-28 March 2009



**Workshop 13**

***Business Elites and Political Activism in the Middle East and North Africae***

**directed by**

**Amr Hamzawy**

Senior Associate

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

[ahamzawy@carnegieendowment.org](mailto:ahamzawy@carnegieendowment.org)

**Michele Dunne**

*Arab Reform Bulletin*

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

[mdunne@carnegieendowment.org](mailto:mdunne@carnegieendowment.org)

***Workshop abstract***

In recent years, members of the business elite in Arab countries have taken increasingly prominent roles in political life, civil society, and the media. Businesspeople are running for elected office, forming or joining political parties, founding non-governmental organizations that advocate for greater civil and political rights, and sponsoring new media outlets. Social science literature has addressed the role of elites in politics extensively, including a recent focus on a new generation of elites in the Arab world specifically. But there is as yet little serious work on the increasingly apparent nexus between the world of business and that of politics in the Middle East and North Africa.

The purpose of this workshop will be to explore the composition of business elites active in politics, civil society, or the media; their motives; and the political implications of their activities:

- Which groups can be considered part of this newly-active elite? How do they relate to the ruling establishments and to other existing political forces?
- What are their motives for greater involvement in political activism, civil society, and the media? How are they affected by domestic and international pressures on governments to pursue political reform?
- What are some of their tactics and strategies to attain their goals?
- What is the impact of their involvement on the various sectors—politics, civil society, media—in which they are active?

### *Workshop description*

In Middle Eastern countries that have experienced at least limited political openings over the past decade, members of the business elite have become increasingly prominent. In Egypt, to give one example, businesspeople running as independents were notably successful in 2000 and 2005 legislative elections—some of them loosely affiliated with the ruling National Democratic Party, some with the Muslim Brotherhood, and others unattached to any political trend. Other well-known businesspeople have helped found political parties (such as the Democratic Front) or have sponsored new media outlets (such as the independent daily *Al-Masry al-Youm* and the private satellite channel O-TV). Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and heir apparent, has built a base of political support primarily from members of the young, globalized business elite.

In Morocco, a group of mostly business leaders who collectively had little prior involvement in politics formed the 2007 Daba association to increase voter participation among women and youth in the September 2007 elections. The board of 2007 Daba includes the CEOs of some of the largest corporations in Morocco, reflecting a wider concern among the business elite about the political disengagement in Morocco. In addition to targeting women and youth, the association also mobilized to augment the role of the intellectual and economic elites within parties.

There are also recent examples of business elites organizing on a region-wide basis, albeit with some international prodding. The Arab Business Council of the World Economic Forum was formed in 2003 to bring together business leaders in the region to develop strategies to increase economic competitiveness. The council subsequently released a “Blueprint for Economic Reform” calling for reforms to address economic liberalization, human resources development, and governance.

While there have always been members of the ruling elite with business interests, the movement of previously apolitical businesspeople into the political sphere in significant numbers is a new phenomenon. Previously, leaders of civil society used to decry the fact that they could find no support in the business community; this is no longer the case.

The phenomenon of new political activity by business elites in the Middle East and North Africa has not yet attracted the attention of social science researchers. This workshop aims to address that gap. The goal is to generate a series of country-specific papers on the involvement of business elites in politics, civil society, and the media, with the hope of publishing the papers as an edited volume.

While there is little writing on this specific topic to date, there is a well established literature on political elites and a new body of work on generational change in elites in the Middle East and North Africa. Starting with the theories of elite pacting in the seminal “Transitions from Authoritarian Rule” study by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, there has been considerable examination of the elite variable in democratic transitions, including further theories about elite divisions and inter-elite bargaining. This convergence between the study of transitions and

of political elites has produced several major theoretical works, including by John Higley and Michael Burton in 1989 and Graeme Gill in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

Recent works on generational change in elites in the region include the 2004 volume *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change*, edited by Volker Perthes, which comprises a series of case studies on the incoming generation of elites in Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Palestinian Territories, and how the political systems have adjusted to maintain the status quo. In building the conceptual framework for the study, Perthes applies the concept of a “politically relevant elite” consisting of concentric circles of the core elite, intermediate elite, and sub elite. Other works along the same lines include a volume published by the Moshe Dayan Center in Tel Aviv, *The Middle East: The Impact of Generational Change*. None of these volumes, however, singles out business elites for particular attention.

This workshop will invite scholars to contribute research papers on the role of business elites in politics, civil society, and media in specific countries in the Middle East (including the Arab countries, Iran, Israel, and Turkey). Papers discussing transregional activism in these spheres by business elites are also welcome. Papers should be based on field research and should discuss some or all of the following questions:

- Which groups can be considered part of this newly-active elite? How do they relate to the ruling establishments and to other existing political forces?
- What are their motives for greater involvement in political activism, civil society, and the media? How are they affected by domestic and international pressures on governments to pursue political reform?
- What are some of their tactics and strategies to attain their goals?
- What is the impact of their involvement on the various sectors—politics, civil society, media—in which they are active?

---

<sup>1</sup> See Graeme J. Gill, *The Dynamics of Democratization: Elites, Civil Society and the Transition Process*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000; John Higley and Michael G. Burton, “The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns,” *American Sociology Review* February 1989, No.54, 17-32; Michael G. Burton and John Higley, “The Study of Political Elite Transformations,” *International Review of Sociology*, 2001, 11(2), 181-199. An Arab case study: Malik Mufti, “Elite bargains and the onset of political liberalization in Jordan,” *Comparative Political Studies* February 1999, 32(1), 100-129.