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Professor speaks on state of Middle East economy, politics

By Ryan Kelly, Intern

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Emile F. Sahliyah of the political science faculty gave a speech about authoritarianism and democracy in the Middle East Monday in the Multicultural Center.

“In a 33-year period from 1970 to 2003, 66 percent or the large majority of the countries in the Middle East were ruled under an oligarchy government system,” Sahliyah said. Countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria use this form of government where most political power effectively rests with a small segment of society usually reserved for the most powerful individuals. Twenty-five percent of the countries in the region were ruled by an autocracy, or dictatorship, while only a measly 9 percent consisted of a democracy, Sahliyah said.

One reason why Sahliyah believes democracy hasn’t caught on in the Middle East is because of oil.

“Oil has been a curse to the Middle Eastern countries,” he said. “For the last 60 years, what governments in the Middle East did was try to use the population by not opening up the political system, but instead offering social services to the people.” Some of these services, he said, included free hospitalization and education to all citizens.

During the mid-80s when the price of oil was less than \$10 a barrel, the governments weren’t able to offer these rewards. Sahliyah believed this was when these same governments started opening up the political system, which included having elections and allowing freedom of the press since the people were upset. But when the price of oil skyrocketed in the mid-90s the governments could go back to their old ways and offered economic rewards to the people.

“Only in a time of economic hardships [do] these regimes genuinely open up the political systems,” Sahliyah said. Another reason why Sahliyah believes there is a lack of democracy in the region is because of the development of civil institutions. “These give the people the ability to form political parties and interest groups to lobby the government for certain causes,” Sahliyah said.

After many Middle Eastern countries gained their independence after 1945, the primary goal of these governments was to build up the nation by having a large military, Sahliyah said.

Since the United States was hit hard by an economic depression during the 1930’s, many countries in the Middle East saw democracy as a government that ultimately ended up in failure and decided against emulating it.

Sahliyah also talked about present-day Iraq and said it was a mistake when the United States disarmed the Iraqi army.

“It would have been better just to get rid of the top leaders or officers instead of the entire army, which would have created more stability and not had 400,000 people unemployed,” he said.

“I was glad I came today ... I learned ... about how taxes are used in the Middle East,” said Persephone Williams, Houston junior. “It was definitely interesting.”



Emile Sahliyah spoke about the Middle East and government to a small gathering Monday afternoon at the Multicultural Center in the University Union. Because of the intimate setting, he turned a chair to face the audience and spoke directly to them.