

## Democracy Promotion in the Middle East. Business as Usual?

Giacomo Luciani\*

*La questione della democrazia nel mondo arabo : stati, società e conflitti / a cura di Federica Bicchi, Laura Guazzone, Daniela Pioppi. - Monza : Polimetrica, c2004. - 396 p. - (Islamica). - ISBN 88-7699-008-9*

This collection of essays edited and to a significant extent also authored by Federica Bicchi, Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, is very timely indeed. Since 11 September 2001, the question of democracy and democratisation in the Arab World has come to occupy centre stage in international relations, inaugurating a new phase characterised by the internationalisation of domestic politics and the demise of the principle of non-interference on which the post-World War II order was largely based.

The centrality of the democracy issue is based on a set of political theory paradigms proposed by US neo-conservative circles and explicitly articulated by US President George W. Bush on several occasions. In this vision, the root cause of terrorism, which threatens the entire Western world and has struck the United States so devastatingly, lies in the lack of legitimacy of governments in Arab and/or Islamic countries.

Governments in these countries are illegitimate because they are not democratic and use violence against their respective populations to repress any expression of opposition, until the only form of opposition that is "practicable" is extremism and terrorist violence. It is therefore necessary to exert diplomatic pressure – and, in the case of Iraq, intervene militarily – to persuade or push the

\* *Giacomo Luciani* is part-time Professor of Political Economy and Co-Director of the Mediterranean Programme, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, as well as Professorial Lecturer of Middle East Studies at Johns Hopkins University, Bologna Centre.

Copyright © 2005 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali.

## 100 Democracy Promotion in the Middle East. Business as Usual?

incumbent regimes to adopt the tools of democracy (or at least to make measurable progress towards democracy, if we believe that the latter can be conquered progressively), so as to allow for the emergence of a moderate public opinion – posited to exist and to be majoritarian – and to isolate extremists.

It is further asserted that the lack of democracy is the root cause of the region's marked tendency to be the site of international conflicts and wars, and one of the causes of regional instability. It is therefore expected that the advent of democracy will usher in a pattern of more peaceful relations and the accommodation of international disputes through peaceful means, hence generating greater regional stability.

Finally, the third leg to the reasoning is that democracy is believed to be supported by the growth of the "middle class" and by a well-developed civil society. The latter in turn prospers in the context of an open market economy. Consequently, promoting the liberalisation of international trade and investment, and limiting the direct interference of the state in the economy also serves the purpose of promoting democracy.

The weakness of this political strategy is that none of these asserted causal links is necessarily confirmed by empirical experience – especially if we consider the dimension of time. In other words, some or all of the above statements are likely to be empirically supported in the long run, but they may very well be contradicted in the short or medium run. We therefore witness a wide consensus on the desirability of establishing democratic regimes in Arab and Islamic countries

– even the incumbent regimes protest that they fully espouse the superiority of democracy – but disagreement on the when and how to pursue the objective of democratisation.

The book edited by Bicchi, Guazzone and Pioppi examines all the key theoretical passages of this reasoning and offers a meticulous critical analysis of each. Not surprisingly, the result is a call for caution and reservations at almost each passage, the multiple ways in which the process can go astray and lead to unintended consequences being well documented.

Following an extensive introduction by Guazzone and Bicchi, which provides an excellent summary of the debate on why there is a lack of democracy in Arab countries, the volume includes chapters on the evolution of the Arab intellectuals' discourse on democracy (Campanini), on the potential democratising role of public Islam (Salvatore) as well as on the link between economic and political liberalisation (Pioppi). These are followed by chapters on the evolution of Western attitudes towards democracy in the Arab world (Guazzone), making it all too painfully clear that quite frequently – and indeed most frequently – the West has not consistently supported democratisation requests or attempts. Quite to the contrary, both Europe and the United States have upheld or forgiven authoritarianism and repression whenever political liberalisation led or threatened to lead to outcomes different from the ones preferred – which has been the rule rather than the exception. The European experience of supporting

democratisation is reviewed in a chapter by Bicchi, in which she very precisely measures the meagre engagement.

The next chapter is devoted to the link between democratisation and the propensity to use war as a tool for the solution of international disputes (Ragionieri). The peculiar traits of the region – with the complication of a pan-Arab ideology that has been discredited yet somehow refuses to die in addition to the issue of Israel – again come to the fore.

The book also includes a set of single-country case studies devoted to Tunisia (Desmeres), Morocco (Catusse), Egypt (Pioppi), Palestine (Garofalo and Marzocchi) and the Gulf monarchies (Ehteshami).

The concluding chapter by Guazzone and Pioppi points to the ambiguity of the situation that characterises the prospects for democracy in the Arab world. On the one hand, no Arab state can be called democratic, and the prospects that any one of them might successfully manage a democratic transition in the near future are slim. At the same time, there is undeniable ferment in the region, and a demand for much

greater political participation on the part of a growing number of actors and social forces, which cannot simply be ignored or repressed.

Thus if we look at the situation from a procedural point of view, we get the impression that the region is undergoing a process of political reform – very gradual and controlled from above, but nevertheless real. However, if we look at it from a substantive point of view, we get the impression that not only is there no democracy, but the progress being made towards it is too little and probably too late. No one can predict the outcome with certainty: the Iraqi experience has definitely been quite sobering and reinforced the influence of those who, well before the invasion, warned against the difficulties of exporting democracy lock, stock and barrel, loading it like cargo onto the back of a conquering tank. The re-evaluation of the situation is already very evident: we seem to be more appreciative of the timid moves undertaken by some of the Gulf monarchies and ready to accept Qaddafi simply because he renounces WMDs – with no concern for the persistently authoritarian nature of his regime. Business as usual?