

Blending Democracy

The Generational Project in the Middle East

Dov S. Zakheim

MAY 16 marked a major watershed in Kuwait's political history. By a margin of 35 to 23, that country's Assembly extended the franchise to women, making it the fourth Gulf country to do so. Yet the impetus for the legislation did not stem from advocates within the Assembly itself. Instead, it came from the oft-criticized government, still ruled by the Al-Sabah clan. Indeed, the franchise law was passed on a snap vote, intended to surprise and outfox the Islamists who dominate Assembly proceedings and who, six years earlier, had overturned the government's decree extending the franchise to women.¹ Such are the meanderings of democracy in the Middle East, where hereditary authoritarian rulers outwit elected legislatures in order to advance the cause of democracy and liberalization.

Democracy may be elbowing its way into the region, but not exactly in the manner that some of its more strident American advocates would necessarily prefer. Euphoria over events that seem to be historical watersheds often fades into disillusionment after the passage of a few years or even a few months. All too often, Western pundits assume, at least

implicitly, that if elections are held the "reformers" will always win, but that is not the case. After all, in Iran, in a result that shocked his nation's elite as much as it did the West, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the ultra-conservative mayor of Tehran, crushed his establishment opponent, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in the second round of Iran's presidential campaign, which drew a voter turnout of over 60 percent. Ahmadinejad, who drew his support from the poorer classes as well as the lower ranks of the clergy, has close ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the Jerusalem Force (which is linked to various terrorist groups), and the Basij militia. He also is a close associate of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Although the Iranian mullahs had rigged the electoral process, Ahmadinejad's final margin of victory was so large as to indicate that his views certainly resonate with a plurality, if not a majority, of the population. And he has made no bones about where he stands on the issue of democracy and freedom.

¹In order to win Islamist support for the measure, the government included in its new legislation the requirement that women voters and candidates conform to sharia law and values. Presumably this meant that if they were not dressed in accordance with those values, they would lose their eligibility to vote and stand for office. The legislation passed with the religious proviso intact, but none of the Islamists voted for it anyway.

Dov S. Zakheim was undersecretary of defense (comptroller) from 2001–04. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Nixon Center and a member of *The National Interest's* Advisory Council.

As he has bluntly put it, “we did not have a revolution to have a democracy.”

Nor was Hizballah’s electoral sweep of southern Lebanon in that country’s legislative elections a particularly ideal outcome for American policymakers who rejoiced in what may have been prematurely dubbed the “Cedar Revolution.” The anti-Syrian opposition mustered a 58-seat majority in the legislature. Nevertheless, that total fell short of the two-thirds required to ensure the removal of pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, who could count on not only Hizballah’s support, but also that of General Michel Aoun’s Maronite Christian faction.

Moreover, Hizballah’s electoral triumph in Lebanon was equally bad news for Washington, which considers it to be a terrorist organization. Like its counterparts in Iraq, Hizballah has refused to disarm its powerful militia. The elections have strengthened its hand; it can continue to play in the political arena without handing over its guns.

Hizballah’s success may also serve as an example to various Palestinian terrorist organizations, notably Hamas, which has already won nearly half the municipal councils it competed for earlier this year. It eagerly anticipates competing in the legislative elections, which were originally scheduled for July, but which Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) has postponed out of fear of a Hamas victory. There is considerable concern in Israeli government circles that a strong Hamas presence in the legislature will allow it to ape Hizballah by claiming “mainstream” status without in any way committing to disarm or end its murderous activities. In fact, not only is this Hamas’s publicly stated position, it has been echoed by Nasser Kidwa, the Palestinian Authority’s foreign minister.

As a result of Hamas’s showing in the municipal elections, many American and European observers—and, not so privately, some officials as well—have already

intensified their call for it to be treated as an integral participant in the peace process. Indeed, the European Union has authorized diplomatic contacts with Hamas, while British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw acknowledged that UK officials had already met with Hamas politicians.

Israel continues bitterly to oppose such contacts, while the Bush Administration likewise continues to view Hamas as a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, it is significant that the case for dealing with Hamas is being argued in some quarters on the basis of bringing democracy to the Middle East. As one columnist put it, “as the U.S. and many governments allied with it consider the challenges posed by Islamist parties, they should similarly not let the rhetoric of counterterrorism get in the way of encouraging the entry into the democratic process of politically effective, mass parties with whose policies they happen to disagree.”² One can only conclude from this argument that the United States should accept the results of the ballot box in the name of “democracy”, regardless of long-term consequences for American interests and regional stability.

At best, democracy has made halting strides in the rest of the region. Only a month after the Iraqi vote, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced electoral changes in late February that, he asserted, arose “out of my full conviction of the need to consolidate efforts for more freedom and democracy.” But the heralded reforms instituted in Egypt’s electoral system have neither satisfied nor quieted critics of the Mubarak regime. They point to the street thuggery against opposition supporters that has actually intensified since the electoral reforms were announced. Most observers have concluded that there really is little change

²Helena Cobban, “U.S. Should Support All Democracy, No Matter Whom It Brings to Power”, *Christian Science Monitor Online*, June 9, 2005.

taking place in the Egyptian political system and that democracy remains out of the reach of Egyptian society.

Iraq's January elections have been succeeded by months of political stalemate and increasingly sectarian bloodshed. Indeed, less than six months after the elections, the government that finally took office announced on June 8 that it would take no steps to dismantle the country's militias, notably the Kurdish peshmerga and the Shi'a Badr Brigade. Naturally, the embittered Sunni viewed the announcement by the Shi'a- and Kurd-dominated government as yet another indication that the new Iraq had no place for them. Equally important, the decision to retain these heavily armed militias intact guarantees a constant threat of civil war—precisely the nightmare scenario that American planners have sought to avoid.

Syria's highly publicized withdrawal from Lebanon encouraged many analysts to believe that winds of change would blow through Damascus as well. Various unofficial emissaries from the Syrian regime attempted to deliver the same message, pointing to the upcoming Ba'ath Congress as a venue for new efforts at political reform. Even prior to the congress, Syria had already recognized as legitimate the long-outlawed Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and at the congress itself the regime indicated that other parties might be able to compete electorally.

Yet change in Syria appears to be even more of a chimera than its purported expulsion from Lebanese politics. There is absolutely no evidence that the Syrian leadership is prepared to truly open the Syrian political system. The Social Nationalist Party "opposition" is both small and enfeebled. The Ba'ath remains constitutionally enshrined as Syria's leading party. And both President Bashar al-Asad's opening remarks to the congress and its final manifesto made clear that no changes would be undertaken as a result of what Asad termed "outside pressures."

Why Culture Matters

THE UNITED States has every reason to trumpet the benefits of democracy, and there is much to commend the efforts of those who would press for a more straightforward march to democracy in the Middle East. In particular, the use of the bully pulpit is essential for creating an atmosphere of international impatience with the snail-like pace that characterizes what usually passes for political reform in the region. Nevertheless, the practicalities of achieving thoroughgoing political and social reforms of societies that often function as they did a millennium ago dictate an understanding of the region's cultural dynamics that often seems absent from the most strident advocates of those reforms.

The Middle East marches to a cultural beat that is simply different from that which motivates modern Western societies. This does not mean that Middle Easterners, and Arabs in particular, are inherently incapable of organizing representative forms of government. One hundred years ago, Persia had a constitutional government with an elected parliament. Lebanon's parliamentary government flourished for three decades in the aftermath of World War II; Iraq had a short-lived parliament as well. Muslims participate actively in the democratic politics of countries across the globe—from India, to Indonesia, to America, to Australia. The concepts of democracy are not alien to Muslims nor to the Middle East. But with the exception of Israel, democracy has never flourished in the region without interruption and has not been able to sustain itself.

This is why the legacy bequeathed by Islam must be directly addressed. Islam is not merely a religion but a way of life that influences the thought processes of its adherents, no matter whether they are very strict in their practice or merely loose-

ly traditional. As a result, a reluctance to question decisions from “on high” is far more ingrained among the populace. This phenomenon is quite independent of any tendencies towards extremism and affects all but the most Westernized secularists.

Islam is a faith that gives pride of place to authority. Moreover, unlike its other monotheistic counterparts, it never has experienced a thoroughgoing reform movement (among its core populations) that challenged the dicta of the established religious leadership. Indeed, one of the few major reform movements within Islam to develop a mass following in recent centuries is none other than Wahhabism—a puritanical counter-reformation against the perceived dilution of Islamic fundamentals.

Islam is also a faith that places great emphasis on the “rule of law”, but its meaning is quite different from what Western societies practice. For Western secularists in particular, the rule of law involves secular, impartial courts interpreting legislation determined by elected representatives of the people as well as the upholding of individual rights. The rule of law in many Arab and Muslim societies is that of *sharia* law, which takes precedence over secular law. *Sharia* law need not be formulated by elected officials, nor does it treat all individuals in identical fashion. In particular, different creeds can be treated differently, while the role of men and women is quite strictly demarcated.

“Women’s rights” in the region do not always yield the same outcomes as they would in the West: Cultural norms are simply different. In the West a woman might be insulted if a man refused to shake her hand; in the Middle East, a devout Muslim woman would be insulted if a man proffered his hand to shake hers. In the West a woman demands the right to dress as she pleases; devout Middle Eastern Muslim women insist on cover-

ing their bodies, their hair, and in many parts of the region, their faces as well. These distinctions are culturally, rather than geographically, bounded: In France young women protested that their rights were being infringed precisely because they could not wear the *hijab* to school. While the rule of law applies equally to Western and Islamic societies, its nature is quite different in each; to pretend otherwise is highly problematic.

In sum, Muslims in the Middle East are not going to be rapidly “secularized” along Western lines. All too often, assumptions about cultural change in the region derive from Western experience with a relatively small group of Arab intellectuals who interface with the West on a regular basis. In a way that resembles the Russian intelligentsia today, these people are often far removed from the daily concerns and priorities of the population at large. It is dangerous to assume that they are the standard-bearers of democracy, even if they are as secular as their Western acquaintances. Attempts to force secular values on a reluctant society could well result in an unwanted backlash that would exacerbate the gap between Islam and the West.

There is no denying the reality that many secular regimes continue to retain their power, if not exactly flourish, in the Middle East. Yet, with the exception of Turkey, none has systematically attempted to undermine the impact of religion upon society. Moreover, all of these regimes have recognized the importance of “making space” for Islamic values, and therefore its authoritarian impulses, even as they monopolize political power. For example, during his last decade in power, Saddam Hussein increasingly cast himself as a religious leader, even contriving to claim an association with King Hussein of Jordan, and thus to the Prophet Muhammad. Syria’s Alawite regime bitterly fought the Muslim Brotherhood and wiped out the Islamist stronghold of

Hama. Yet Hafez al-Asad felt the need to get a fatwa legitimating his Alawite sect as a branch of Shi'a Islam. Indeed, even Turkish society is undergoing a religious revival that is gradually undermining Atatürk's reforms; that country is now governed by an Islamist party.

While its secular example has not been truly replicated throughout the region, Turkey has bequeathed a different legacy—that of its Ottoman past. Turkey's Ottoman legacy actually reinforced the non-democratic tendencies of Middle Eastern populations. The Ottoman Middle East, which comprised the entire region with the notable exception of Iran, stifled the development of viable democratic institutions. It also spawned a culture of corruption that is the bane of whatever democratic institutions do come into being. Indeed, these same two phenomena—lack of democratic development and endemic corruption—continue to plague the former Ottoman provinces of southeastern Europe.

Finally, the region still suffers from a third unhappy legacy. Much of the Middle East—like parts of the Balkans and other areas where democracy struggles to take root—remains mired in tribal blood feuds and hatreds. Sometimes, though not always, these feuds overlap with religious or ethnic differences. In most cases, they supersede all other allegiances, however, making it exceptionally difficult to create strong central governments that are not autocratic in nature.

WHILE ALL of these legacies cannot be ignored, they are not insurmountable. Culture is not destiny. Nevertheless, it is fanciful to expect Middle Eastern society to mount a sustained drive toward region-wide democratization. In this regard, the Middle East is not alone. Europe's march to democracy has hardly been linear. When Iran first experimented with democracy, much of Europe was

ruled by emperors, only to be succeeded by fascist dictators. And while Lebanon's democracy flourished, half of Europe was choked by communism. It is true that once the Berlin Wall fell many central European states quickly established democratic forms of government that are flourishing today. Yet virtually every one of those states had a democratic legacy that predated their occupation by either Nazi or Soviet forces or both. Where no such legacy existed, as in some former Soviet states in both Europe and Central Asia, democracy remains a dream for the future.

Latin America is currently undergoing another period of social and political retrenchment. Democracy has come, gone and come again in several of its leading states, notably Argentina and Brazil. It currently seems to be disappearing quickly in Venezuela, while in the Andean states of Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, governments change under the threat of mob rule rather than by the ballot box. Like the former Ottoman provinces of both the Middle East and southeastern Europe, these Latin American states suffer from endemic corruption at all levels of society. They also share with all the non-oil producing Middle Eastern states both literacy levels and per capita GDPs that are lower than those of developed democracies.

Having a relatively corruption-free society, maintaining high literacy rates and sustaining a growing economy do not guarantee that democracy will flourish in a given state.³ The Soviet bloc always boasted high literacy rates, while China's

³Morton H. Halperin et al. argue that democracy promotes economic development more than autocracy does. Yet they are forced to acknowledge that authoritarian China has been able to harness the capitalist system more effectively than democratic India. See Halperin, Joseph T. Siegle and Michael M. Weinstein, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote*

literacy rate rivals those of many Western democracies. Similarly, economic development in China, while uneven, nevertheless surpasses that of democratic India and of many smaller democracies. Yet if lack of corruption, high education levels and economic growth are not sufficient conditions for democracy, they certainly are necessary conditions for democracy, and none of these conditions can be realized overnight.

Democracy itself cannot be realized overnight, either. East Timor is a recent example of a state born into democracy that is regressing toward autocracy. Of course, the most egregious cases were post-World War I Germany and post-tsarist Russia. The notion that somehow the Middle East can be “transformed” quickly into a democratic region—even by force of arms—therefore is simply unrealistic.

Dictators or Reformers?

ADVOCATES OF a muscular approach to the imposition of democratic values frequently argue that the United States has coddled Middle Eastern autocrats who at least verbally support its strategic objectives. They assert that while this approach may have been marginally tolerable during the Cold War, it is no longer an acceptable policy—meaning Washington should now be an unstinting supporter of those who urgently call for the removal of one-party presidents-for-life and hereditary monarchs throughout the Middle East. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that any critic of the status quo in the region is automatically in favor of liberal democracy.

In the context of Middle Eastern politics, such a premise misses the point. In the Middle East, reform has often come from above, despite, not because of, the demands of key sectors of the public. The Middle East has certainly seen its share of

brutal tyrants, but it is a fallacy to lump them in the same category of autocrats as traditional rulers.

The kings, princes and emirs who tell their Washington interlocutors that they support a path of gradual reform for their conservative societies do have a record to back up their case beyond merely continuing the tradition of *diwaniya*, which enables ordinary citizens to meet face-to-face with their rulers in a fashion that compares favorably with Western citizens’ interaction with officialdom.

The shah of Iran, for all his other faults, granted minorities—notably Druze and Jews—freedoms that are unheard of in Iran today. Druze are mercilessly persecuted; Jews are marginally tolerated. Under the shah, women had opportunities that they must fight for today. And they were not forced to wear the *chador* or use devious stratagems to maintain their coiffures even as they keep their hair covered.

It was the crown prince of Kuwait whose government was the leading advocate of franchise for women, who refused to bow to Assembly opposition to the franchise and who only attached Islamic provisos under pressure from Assembly “commoners” that threatened to torpedo the legislation for a second time. The Sabahs of Kuwait are hardly alone among the region’s current hereditary rulers who have initiated many of its social and political reforms. The Kuwaiti ruling family was not even the first in the Gulf to grant women the franchise. Women already had the right to vote in the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman and Emirate of Qatar. In addition, the emir of Qatar was the first Gulf ruler to permit an unrestricted free press to operate in his country, often to the annoyance of his conservative—and powerful—Saudi neighbors. The rulers

Peace and Prosperity (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates have created a unique mix of social and economic freedom in their city-state unrivalled in much of the world. The kings of Jordan and Morocco, both descended from the Prophet Muhammad, were among the first to give women ministerial and other high governmental offices. They have also gone to great lengths to preserve and protect minority rights. And they have increasingly opened the political process, permitting opposition parties to function actively in the national legislatures.

What all of these rulers have in common with each other is that they are allied to the United States. Relatively speaking, the traditional Arab rulers in the region, and most of its non-hereditary rulers as well (Syria being a major exception), share one other characteristic: None is hostile to the United States because of its support for Israel. To a greater or lesser extent, they accept Israel's place in the region. Given their steps, however halting, toward creating freer societies, their willingness to countenance a Middle East peace settlement and the virulent anti-Americanism of much of their opposition, it must be asked whether it is really in America's interest to distance itself from such regimes. Constructive engagement with friends who are slow to respond but respond nonetheless is one thing; rejection is quite another.

This is why the tone of a recent study by a Council on Foreign Relations Task Force is troubling. It argues that "the United States must convey the message that the general quality of bilateral relations will be contingent, in part, upon reform. . . . [I]t should take steps to distance itself from governments that refuse over time to recognize the political rights of their citizens." This statement begs a key question: By the council's measure, is the progress that traditional monarchies are achieving to open their political and economic systems sufficiently rapid to pre-

vent the United States from dealing with them at arm's length? In other words, what does "over time" really mean, and how fast is fast enough?

Blended Democracy

PERHAPS THE single most important reason for the revival of democracy in states such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the Baltic states was the fact that throughout Soviet or communist rule, the United States and other Western states, as well as the Catholic Church, provided steady public encouragement, and often secret financial support, to the key elements of their civil societies. Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, the BBC's foreign language services, the journal *Encounter* and the activities of the AFL-CIO, including funding for Poland's Solidarity union, are only among the best-known examples of these activities. All of them helped reinforce the memories of a free society that the peoples of these states harbored during the seemingly endless decades of communist rule. To the extent that the authorities tolerated civic and religious organizations of various kinds, the United States and other Western nations interacted with these organizations as much as possible. To the extent that the communist authorities suppressed such groups, support was as steady as it was clandestine.

The West's efforts to reach out to captive societies during the Cold War not only involved a long-term commitment but also required a concerted program to reach out to all levels of those societies. In contrast, it is not at all clear that the United States in particular has anything like the same range of contacts and interfaces across the length and breadth of Middle Eastern society. Only a small group of Arab intellectuals interfaces with the West on a regular basis. They are the scholars, pundits and analysts that are

quoted in learned studies and that write op-eds in major American newspapers. Most of them are Western-educated, English-speaking, at most religiously traditional, but usually highly secular. In a telling example of the failure of the elites to mobilize the less educated in support of Western values, a young Iranian educated activist who held workshops on “understanding democracy” and “women’s rights in Islam” for the less privileged stated in despair: “They didn’t want to hear about human rights. We never reached them. It’s our failure.”

It is time to move away from the paradigm that postulates a choice between Western secular democracy on the one hand and Arab and Muslim tyranny on the other, with no middle ground possible. Nor is there much validity to the related belief that the Middle Eastern masses can somehow be converted into Western liberals, nor to that which argues that Western notions of secular democracy can triumph in the traditional Middle East.

What is needed is a Middle Eastern version of democracy that in form may hardly resemble its Western counterparts, though in substance will offer the people of the region the freedoms they seek, in common with the rest of mankind. First and foremost is the freedom to pray freely to the God of their choice. In addition, Middle Easterners of all stripes seek the freedom to earn a decent living, the right to an education, and, finally, to be represented, and to represent themselves, to their rulers and to be judged fairly by them. How they are represented is a secondary issue.

Replacing or even alienating traditional rulers is unlikely to achieve these goals. There are simply too many intolerant radicals eagerly waiting in the wings to do for their countries what the mullahs—now in power for more than a quarter-century—have done for Iran. An alternative approach would be to blend indigenous values with democratic ideals.

“Blended democracy” is far more likely to take permanent root in a region whose people address life’s major concerns from a profoundly different perspective than that of their Western counterparts.

For the same reason, attempts to press Middle Eastern regimes to move quickly to impose the “rule of law” will founder on the shoals of *sharia*. Middle Eastern democracy is unlikely to involve English common law or the Code Napoleon for many years to come. Anyone defining the rule of law as the complete replacement of *sharia* law by purely secular norms will merely be branded a heretic.

What would be far more practical is the hybrid of traditional and secular law that is currently being experimented with in Afghanistan and may yet be implemented in Iraq. Such a hybrid is unlikely to meet Western standards, particularly with respect to achieving unfettered women’s and minority rights. Nevertheless, it is more likely to stand the test of time, as local populations become more habituated to and comfortable with new norms of Western origin that are commingled with practices with which they have long been familiar. Such an approach is the only way to offset the influence of radical religious leaders on younger generations of Middle Easterners, many of whom have solid middle class backgrounds but are religiously more strict than their parents.

Getting from Here to There

CERTAINLY, THE United States should be willing and receptive to requests from others to support, stabilize or enhance their own nascent democratic political systems. But brandishing “democracy” like a sword over the rulers of other nations, distancing itself even from those rulers who initiate reforms, on the grounds that they are moving too slowly, and creating an atmosphere that leads

them to believe that they will be destabilized if not forcefully removed, will not enable the United States to achieve its objectives in the Middle East. Indeed, such behavior is likely to be counter-productive. It would merely create opportunities for extremists to exploit the political system for their own anti-democratic and anti-American ends. Moreover, it could frighten ruling elites into inactivity and perhaps even greater repression. Finally, it would certainly torpedo any hope of achieving a viable peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Without such a peace, America will never be able to dispel the region-wide Arab predisposition to dismiss whatever it offers because of its unstinting support of Israel. Too many advocates of muscular democratic diplomacy fail to account for both the cultural milieu in which their proposals would be implemented and the far-reaching and negative consequences that would inevitably flow from them.

Equally critical is the recognition that if it truly wishes to encourage a more democratic Middle East, the United States must recognize that sponsoring one, two or even three sets of elections simply is not enough. The United States would instead do better by committing itself to the long haul—not merely in terms of its deployment of monetary and human resources, but also, and equally importantly, its high-level attention—if it is ever to achieve its political objectives. To that end, Washington should utilize many of the tools that brought it success during the Cold War. It should provide financial support to elements of

civil society such as unions, professional organizations and journalists. It should sustain schools that offer non-religious curricula, whether these curricula are taught alongside or apart from religious studies. It should promote and fund college-level educational institutions that require English for professional and technical proficiency and should generously fund scholarships to these institutions. It should refine its foreign language broadcasts and telecasts to reflect indigenous preferences and draw upon indigenous resources to the maximum extent possible. It should target development aid that assigns priority to advancing good governance.

Finally, those who advocate democracy must recognize not only that they will not and cannot fashion Middle Eastern societies in Washington's image, but that whatever success they do achieve will take years, perhaps decades, to materialize. Americans are known for many wonderful qualities. Patience, however, is not one of them. But democracy has no fixed timetable; it cannot be rushed.

Patience is especially not a characteristic of the neo-Wilsonians who would reshape the Middle East. Particularly in a part of the world that measures its history in centuries and millennia, patience is essential. Rapid upheavals have rarely yielded the results America hoped for: not in Egypt in 1953, not in Iraq in 1958, not in Iran in 1979. The stakes in the Middle East are as high as they ever have been. We should be careful that our best intentions do not lead to disasters that will take decades to undo. □