

Democracy and the Palestine Question: a Lesson from Tunisia

Khaled Hroub

Tunisians took to the streets in February protesting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's scheduled visit to their country in November 2005 to attend the World Information Summit. Inviting Sharon, seen as a war criminal by many Tunisians and other Arabs, was an undemocratic decision by the Tunisian regime exercised against the popular will of the Tunisian people. By taking this decision, the regime hoped to minimize U.S. pressure and criticism of the Tunisian presidential election last October. Through a combination of draconian security measures and scandalous constitutional amendments, President Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali won the elections by more than 95 percent of the vote, thus continuing his unbroken rule since 1987. Other Arabs—among them Egyptians, Moroccans, Jordanians, Omanis, and Mauritians—also protest frequently against the normalization of relations with Israel adopted by their governments in order to appease the United States.

The United States does not see normalization, which tops the list of issues about which it puts pressures on Arab governments, as an unpopular dictate imposed on people. From the perspective of the current U.S. administration, linking the two seemingly separate issues of democracy in the Arab world and Palestine/Israel is polemical and baseless. In fact, it is not. They are intimately linked and have a profound impact on each other. An unsolved Palestine question is a major source of distraction from the course of promoting democracy in the region. The traditional Arab view that solving the Palestine question is a prerequisite for democracy in Arab countries, even in places as far from Palestine as Tunis, Rabat, Muscat, and Nouakchott, is still as widely shared as ever. While U.S. pressure on Arab regimes to reform will make limited inroads, a real shift toward democracy is contingent on the full and active support of Arab populations. So long as no just solution is reached on the Palestine question, U.S. policies—including democracy promotion—will continue to be seen as insincere and hypocritical.

Among the reasons for Arab scepticism about U.S. democracy promotion is the fact that the policy is riddled with paradoxes. First, there is the standard and well-known trade-off of concern about internal reform in favor of guaranteeing certain U.S. strategic interests, such as cooperation in the so-called war on terror. Then there is the unanswered question regarding how the United States would view the prospective victory of Islamist movements in democratic elections if they were conducted freely and fairly. There is also the contradictory U.S. position concerning the rise of relatively free and democratic Arab media (such as Al Jazeera), with the United States pressing governments to silence what is seen by many to be almost the only active democratic forum in the region. Another paradox is the indirect discrediting and harming of indigenous Arab democracy activists, who are increasingly perceived as American proxies. Most damaging of all is unqualified U.S. support of Israel despite its occupation of Palestinian lands.

Military occupation of any people, such as Israeli military rule over the Palestinians, is the most flagrant mode of authoritarianism and violates the basic notions of democracy.

Leaving this disastrous case unresolved while focusing on reform in Arab countries, allegedly because of the urgent need for democracy, is hypocritical. Moreover, putting pressure on the very same Arab countries to open relations with an uncompromising Israel—undemocratically and against the will of their people—is not only damaging to any internal democratisation process but exposes the emptiness of the entire endeavor.

Arab regimes are smart enough to see that they can still use normalization steps with Israel to relieve U.S. pressure for democratization. Thus, unless the United States relocates resolving the Palestine/Israel question to the top of its agenda, the end result of U.S. democracy policy will be at best the cloning and repackaging of the Jordanian and Moroccan models of democracy. In other words, mere cosmetic reform measures will continue to clothe essentially authoritarian modes of rule.

Khaled Hroub is director of the Cambridge Arab Media Project and author of “ Hamas: Political Thought and Practice” (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000).