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Understanding Arab Political Reality

One Lens Is Not Enough

By Amr Hamzawy

We are witnessing unusual scenes in the Middle East. Mass demonstrations in Lebanon, joint protest rallies of Egyptian Islamists and liberals against the Mubarak regime in Egypt, and municipal elections in Saudi Arabia are just as much features of the current situation as are cease-fire declarations by Palestinian resistance movements and multiparty negotiations for forming a coalition government in Iraq. The Arab world is changing, and in a very profound way. But in contrast to ideological debates about the extent to which the events have been initiated by the Middle East policies of the Bush administration or whether local and regional factors have also contributed to them, the real challenge of the moment is to comprehend the various directions in which such widely different countries as Lebanon and Saudi Arabia are developing politically.

It is difficult to foresee the outcomes of the long-anticipated Arab change. The dream of pluralist polities and open public spheres goes hand-in-hand with the risk of authoritarian backlash and radical Islamist insurgencies. Although analysts and policy makers are tempted to forecast a sweeping movement toward democracy and freedom in countries from Morocco to Bahrain, it would be misleading to reduce the current regional diversity to one-dimensional talks about an emerging “Arab Spring.” Indeed, in looking at the Arab world of 2005, one needs more than an analytical lens to account for the different, partially contradictory, trends that structure its contemporary political condition. Democratization is but one of these trends and probably the most vulnerable among them.

Mapping the Arab Political Situation

The political path of the Arab world is uncertain because the nature of profound transformations in nondemocratic countries is inherently ambiguous, in which neither the driving logic nor the consequences are clear from the outset. Eastern Europe was transformed between 1989 and 1991, but the current outcomes could not have been foreseen at the beginning of the process. Similarly, the directions that the Arab countries will

take will also be difficult to predict. Managing contradictory processes and understanding ambivalent dynamics are the major challenges of transitional phases.

In the 1980s and 1990s, we witnessed seemingly promising beginnings of reform in the Arab world that did not bring about any substantial changes. Different measures of political liberalization did not pave the way for real democratic change, and privatization strategies led to stagnant crony capitalist structures rather than socially responsible market economies. Several Arab countries suffered from a systematic rise of radical ideologies and violent movements that had their root causes in state repression and economic deprivation. Traditional elements, mainly tribalism and primordial loyalties, remained as persistent in the social culture as authoritarian notions in the prevailing political culture.

Above all, in the last two decades, the region lacked agents of peaceful, domestic transformation. Arab ruling elites, including the young, Western-educated, generation of monarchs and presidents' sons, were not interested in reforms in any substantial way. Liberal parties and civil society organizations were never able to alter their legacy of structural weakness and social isolation. Forming broad alliances for change that contest the dominance of autocratic rulers and force democratic concessions clearly exceeded their capacity in the 1980s and 1990s. During that period, nonviolent popular Islamist movements, such as the Egyptian and Jordanian branches of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party, had yet to make a strategic commitment to democratic change. Caught in the iron grip of state oppression, continuous radicalization at the fringes of the Islamist spectrum, and international fears of their potential role, these movements were forced out of the official political sphere. The fact that nonviolent Islamist movements increasingly focused on rhetorically sound, though politically unattainable, issues—such as the implementation of the Islamic Law and the Islamization of educational systems—did not help them overcome their marginalization. Rather, it lent credibility to the negative perception of Islamists as fanatics who are less interested in tolerating the diversity of their societies or accommodating political pluralism in any serious way. In retrospect, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of stagnation and violence in the Arab world that came to a symbolic and tragic end on September 11, 2001. This period demonstrated the failure of Arab political forces, regimes, and opposition movements alike to act as catalysts of democratic change in their societies.

In the last few years, however, this overall picture has been gradually rearranged. Confronted with frustrated domestic populations, as well as Western, primarily American, efforts to promote change in the region, a number of Arab governments have embarked on the road to reform or accelerated the pace of implementing such reforms. Changing regional conditions, especially since the collapse of the Baath regime in Iraq, have helped create an unprecedented momentum for debating the perspectives of political change.

Democratization Trend

In view of the region's diversity, three complementary interpretations of contemporary Arab reality are plausible: democratization, emergence of ethno-religious conflicts, and rediscovery of the nation-state. The confident expectation of the first trend, democratization, can not be dismissed. There are indeed increasing signs that political transformations are beginning in several countries. Iraqis and Palestinians have voted in fairly free elections, admittedly under the shadow of U.S. and Israeli occupation, respectively, with high voter turnouts in both cases. The Iraqi elections have produced a power constellation that prevents the feared hegemony of the Shi'ite majority and compels Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani and his allies to

address the demands of other groups in the population in order to arrive at a national consensus. At least in the short term, there is no longer the threat of a theocratic Iraq along the lines of the Iranian Islamic Republic model.

In Palestine, the Islamist resistance movement Hamas is showing increasing willingness to participate in the parliamentary elections scheduled for July 2005. This is not surprising given that in the last municipal elections in the occupied territories Hamas won 70 percent of contested seats in Gaza and 25 percent in the West Bank. The cease-fire with Israel and the toleration of President Abu Mazen are thus being cemented in place by a pragmatic about-face. The Islamist opposition groups are well on the way to defining themselves as actors among others in the legal political sphere, where ideological struggles and conflicts over national interests are to be carried out peacefully within the framework of existing institutions. The future Palestinian parliament will become the training ground for Hamas with regard to moderation and tolerance of political diversity.

There is no doubt, however, that the Iraqi and Palestinian developments offer only limited scope for broader statements about the Arab world as a whole. Both models will retain their character as exceptions for some time, particularly from an Arab point of view. Nevertheless, discounting them both as regionally irrelevant becomes more difficult if the impending changes in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are taken into consideration. Viewed together, the events in these three countries signal a rupture in the dominant authoritarian patterns of the state–society relationship. In the face of frustrated majorities and growing Western criticism of undemocratic forms of governance, the autocratic regimes in Riyadh and Cairo and the pro-Syrian government in Lebanon have been obliged to initiate political reforms.

To be sure, Saudi Arabian elections that still disenfranchise women or Syrian promises to withdraw soldiers and secret agents from Lebanon do not represent fundamental changes in the sense of a sustainable process of democratization. There is also a real danger that the Egyptian constitutional amendment allowing more than one candidate to run in the upcoming presidential election next fall will be robbed of all meaning as in the case of the model used in Tunisia, where Bin Ali carefully staged the inevitable extension of his period in office along pluralist lines. In the absence of viable opposition movements with considerable constituencies that contest authoritarian power and force concessions, the Arab path to democracy continues to be problematic. Without the formation of far-reaching alliances for democracy, the Arab autocrats might eventually manage to deal with internal and external pressures either by inventing a “theater of democratization” based on cosmetic reforms or by discrediting calls for political change as acts of subversion and foreign aggression against the national sovereignty.¹ History shows that authoritarian rulers are well equipped to successfully play the game of “us against them” and in doing so to portray themselves as national heroes whose unquestioned obedience becomes a sacred duty.

Despite these legitimate reservations about democratization in the region, the crucial point remains that the autocrats in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Egypt are being moved to initiate reforms. They are no longer able to react to internal protest movements using their usual extensive repertoire of repressive instruments; rather they are bowing to the pressure of an increasingly disenchanting public who was never very receptive to the ideals of democracy, good governance, human rights, and political participation. A crack has emerged in the authoritarian pattern of the state–society relationship, and there is no way of reversing its dynamics, regardless of how actively representatives of the ruling regime attempt to portray the occasional municipal election and constitutional amendment as acts of enlightenment or

generosity on the part of benevolent rulers. In a region with a widespread political culture of lament, passivity, and fear of authorities, there is something truly revolutionary about these events. The autumn of the patriarchs is approaching.

Militant Islamism and Ethno-Religious Conflicts

At the other end of the spectrum, a second trend is also gathering momentum in the contemporary Arab world: the threat of militant Islamism and ethnic violence endemic in different countries. In contrast to Algeria and Egypt, where the tide of religious-motivated violence clearly ebbed in the last years, in the Gulf there is now a growing radicalization among Islamist splinter movements. Inspired by the survival of Osama Bin Laden and the terrorist momentum in Iraq, such groups perceive the current political situation in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the two most potentially explosive examples, as the final battle against the infidels. There the irrationality of fatalist violence is becoming a feature of everyday life, forcing state authorities to adopt repressive countermeasures. Feeding on the continued existence of a deep-rooted conservative culture in the Gulf countries and a growing dissatisfaction among wider segments of the population with the ruling families, militant Islamism is destabilizing the region.

The rise of militant Islamism in the Gulf impacts negatively on the prospects of democratic change. Gulf regimes justify the slow rate of reform (Saudi Arabia) or its standstill (Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman) with the need to combat terror and preserve national security. With good reason, the United States and the European Union also avoid exerting real pressure on the Gulf rulers to open up their political landscapes. Maintaining public order in this strategically vital area weighs much more heavily in terms of *realpolitik* than any dreams of democracy, especially if major opposition forces subscribe to an understanding of politics inspired by undemocratic notions.

A different destabilizing factor arises from the fertile ground of ethno-religious cleavages. Not infrequently, Arab regimes have a one-sided ethnic composition that does not reflect social realities and is not mediated by national consensus. Repression and marginalization have long been on the agenda in Algeria affecting the Berber population, in Syria toward the Sunni majority, and in the Gulf, particularly in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, in the attitude of the state toward the Shiites. For long periods, repression was also characteristic of social and political conditions in Iraq as well as in Sudan concerning the relationship between the Arab-Muslim north and the African non-Muslim south. Now the ethno-religious composition of the prevailing power structure in both countries is changing, and political institutions are gradually including the representation of the various ethnic and religious groups sanctioned democratically. This development, particularly with respect to Iraq, is not something that has gone unnoticed by the Arab public. Everywhere in the region the voices of the underrepresented are growing louder, and the contours of their demands for political representation and power sharing are becoming clearer. The “underdogs” are finally finding a voice in leaders such as Al Sistani in Iraq and John Garang of the resistance movement in southern Sudan.

Few Arab countries that are affected by ethno-religious tensions have the necessary consensus-oriented political and institutional means to defuse expected conflicts. The Syrian Baath regime reacted last year with the usual mixture of brutal repression and cheap nationalistic propaganda to the disquiet in the Kurdish region. Even in Bahrain, where semidemocratic structures already exist, the voice of the Shiite majority of the population is not properly heard, and they understandably feel repressed. Although democratic reforms

designed to widen the scope of participation and integrate different groups into the political sphere represent the only recipe against popular emerging ethno-religious conflicts, in the Arab context this factor tends to impact negatively on the prospects of peaceful, domestic transformation. At times, it seems that the ruling elites in the countries in question react to potential threats with even more brutal and uncompromising attempts to defend their power.

Rediscovery of the Nation-State

A third trend—that of the rediscovery of the nation-state—becomes clear when examining the situation in Lebanon. The views of the main figures in current Lebanese political scene are widely divergent, but the leader of Hezbollah, Hussein Nasrallah, as well as leaders of the anti-Syrian opposition movement, such as Walid Jumblat and Michele Auwn, seem committed to an emerging civic consensus based on the centrality of Lebanon as a nation-state. This is not only symbolized by the ban on all foreign and party flags at the Beirut rallies but is also demonstrated in the unanimous agreement across all political camps that the fate of the country should be negotiated in a broadly democratic fashion within the political framework sanctioned by the nation-state, and without external interventions. That was the key message of the million-strong demonstrations of Hezbollah, which provided impressive evidence of its broad constituency and its political ambitions in Lebanon. The meaning of national sovereignty is thus transformed from an anxious collective “us against the outside world”—irrespective of whether the capital of that outside world is Washington, Tel Aviv, or Damascus—to the more amenable and consensus-oriented formulation “us among ourselves,” on the basis of which national politics becomes the number one priority of all actors.

Lebanon is not an exception in this regard. The rediscovery of the nation-state and the acceptance of its sanctioned borders as the way ahead for political claims can also be currently felt throughout the Arab world. The nation-state, long scorned by pan-Arabists of different ideological inclinations and fought by Islamist movements, is finally rehabilitating itself and pushing romantic transnational concepts of an Arab or Islamic *umma* (Islamic community) into the political background. At the demonstrations of the Egyptian protest movement *Kifaya* (Enough) throughout the last three months, neither anti-American nor anti-Israeli slogans were being hurled out to the gathered masses. The situation in Iraq and the occupation of Palestine, normally a sure way to incite the crowds, were not mentioned with a single sentence. Instead, rhetoric focused on Egypt and the future of political reforms on the Nile. Even the disadvantaged Shiites of Bahrain and Saudi-Arabia demand changes within the framework of their respective nation-states. Just as in Iraq, they have no separatist Shiite ambitions but strive to achieve a better political representation of their interests and a more just distribution of wealth between themselves and other population groups.

The nation-state is back in the Arab reality, and with it comes a degree of political pragmatism long absent in the region. Yet the major challenge facing ruling elites and opposition forces alike is to move beyond the repressive legacy of the twentieth century in which unitary states dominated over their societies by abolishing their diversity in the name of an alleged modernity or an aggressive perception of organic nationalism. Put differently, what is needed in the Arab world is to reinvent the tradition of the state–society relationship along the lines of pluralism, integration, and consensus. Where the signs of the day point in this direction, the rediscovery of the nation-state can help foster democratic reforms; where

signs do not point in this direction, ethno-religious and distribution conflicts will soon be on the agenda.

Managing Ambivalence

Recent political changes in Arab countries reveal a heterogeneous and ambivalent overall picture. It would be misleading to reduce its complexity by referring to one grand narrative, be it that of democracy or militant Islamism. To be sure, both explain central aspects of reality; however, they fail to account for other phenomena as dominant as the emergence of ethno-religious conflicts and the rediscovery of the nation-state. Equally, the current regional scene lends no credibility to attempts geared toward identifying one of the three described trends—democratization, ethno-religious conflicts, and return of the nation-state—as the more viable future scenario. What is certain is that the Arab world of 2005 is in flux.

Understanding the Arab condition or forecasting its potential developments has always been an uneasy venture. This is the region of impulsive beginnings, abrupt ends, and unprecedented shifts. In view of today's diversity, clear-cut judgments or predictions are destined to be of limited explanatory power just as they were back in 1979 (Iranian Revolution), in 1981 (assassination of Anwar Al Sadat), and in 1990 (Saddam's invasion of Kuwait). Once again observers of Arab politics face the challenge of analyzing contradictory trajectories and patiently managing ambivalences when approaching the region. ■

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¹ Most recently, in an interview published in the French daily *Le Figaro* (March 25, 2003), Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak accused the opposition movement *Kifaya* (Enough) of being a marionette of external forces.