

The challenges of democratisation and political reform in the Middle East: Between Autocracy, Islamism and Liberalism

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The al-Qa'ida led or inspired terrorist offensive, based on a skewed interpretation of international jihad, has pushed political reform in the Middle East to the top of the agenda. A new consensus has emerged: democracy is necessary in the Middle East to marginalise Islamic extremists and de-legitimise political violence. Europe's new Strategy for the Mediterranean and the Middle East and the New Neighbouring Policy, along with the US government's new Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative, are all intended to facilitate the democratisation of Muslim societies.

Is it possible to democratise the Arab world? From the point of view of its political model, and according to analyst Daniel Brumberg, Arab countries can be classified into two major groups: 1) total autocracies of a quasi-revolutionary, populist, or patrimonial origin, and 2) liberal autocracies. Political reform in total autocracies seems very unlikely today. Although minor decisions have been taken in some total autocracies to liberalise, the Syrian, Libyan, Tunisian and Saudi authorities seem to have realised that the costs of any possible political opening could be very high because of the difficulty of reaching agreement with a very radicalised opposition. These leaders have therefore concluded that total autocracy is the only option for the survival of the regimes in place.

Nevertheless, most Arab citizens today live under autocracies that allow some degree of political freedom. The wave of popular discontent that swept through most of the non-oil producing Arab states during the 1980s brought about a process of political liberalisation designed to face the crisis. This process, however, left the main structure of power in most of these countries untouched. Although some political forces (i.e., Islamists, leftists, liberals and seculars), stimulated by the prospect of change, tried to enrich the political process in the hopes of building a competitive democracy, freedom of speech and legitimate political activities remained limited, and old taboos (place of religion in society, the person of the president or the king, the army) remained firmly in place.

Twenty five years later, these liberal autocracies have shown how adept they are at keeping traditional elites in power. The combination of guided pluralism, controlled elections and selective repression in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait or Yemen, is not anymore a strategy of survival, but a type of political system whose institutions, rules and logic challenge any model of democratisation. Is it possible to go beyond such controlled liberalisation? Which measures could the new western initiatives implement to promote political change in Arab societies?

The only political forces that have been able to grow in the political arena designed by liberal autocracies are the Islamist movements. The processes of re-Islamisation of society, supported by liberal autocracies, have helped to increase their influence. They have become the most important opposition forces to the different regimes. Their integration in the political arena, and their lack of credibility as a movement which uses the most illiberal interpretations of Islam to mobilise their members, have been some of the biggest challenges for the process of political liberalisation. These challenges have created intractable problems due to the lack of prior agreements among the different

political forces, as has happened in Algeria. Furthermore, the Islamist parties' lack of commitments to democratic values has been used by the different regimes to hamper or to limit their participation in the political game.

The evolution of the Islamist trend in the last decade and the great diversity within the movement obliges us to re-examine and re-conceptualise the different strands of the movement, and the changes that have taken place in the conduct and thought of the Islamic political activists, including the role they play in Muslim societies. It is necessary to identify in the Islamist network which forces and movements can be actors in the process of political reform in the Arab world. A recent ICG report suggests establishing a clear distinction between political and religious activists, violence being a trade-mark of religious activism. There is a growing consensus among scholars that, among political activists, a critical evaluation of past experiences has convinced broad fringes of the movement that, in spite of the limits of the liberalisation sponsored by the elites, there is no alternative to a gradual strategy which includes political participation. Moderate Islamists participate in the rhetoric of political liberalisation because they think that they can benefit from the democratisation of Arab societies. Here it is important to underline that their political thought has evolved towards pluralism, and not liberalism. Although it is not clear to what extent their new commitment to democracy is sincere, it should not be ruled out that an ideological evolution could end up accepting the pluralist dimension of Muslim societies. In a democratic context, ideological positions tend to dilute, as the Justice and Development Party has shown in Turkey.

Until now, the policies implemented by western governments to promote democracy in the Arab world have been modest and focused on programmes designed to improve government management, rather than to support civil society and NGOs. The Middle East Partnership Initiative, launched by the United States in December 2002 to promote democracy in the region, is a good example of this more modest strategy. In its first fifteen months, 98 million dollars were allocated to various projects. Seventy per cent of this money was channelled towards government institutions, and only 3 per cent to NGOs. In a similar vein, only a very small percentage of the funds of the MEDA programs have been used to promote human rights and democracy. It seems that the BMENA initiative and the New Neighbourhood Policy of the European Union will focus more on promoting good governance than political change. The new strategy will probably result in the consolidation of liberal autocracies because it will help governments ameliorate their results without eliminating restrictions to political participation. The West has adopted again a gradual approach that defends liberalisation from the top, and assumes that, with time, the regimes will agree to share power.

Liberalisation from the top, however, does not loosen sufficiently the control of the regimes to permit the formation of political alternatives to the State or to the Islamists. The articulation of these alternatives is essential in any process of political liberalisation. The process of re-Islamisation promoted by liberal autocracies has limited the influence of secular political movements, hindering the consolidation of forces that uphold a liberal interpretation of Islam, that could become an alternative to the anti-liberalism that characterises the Islamic movements. Democratisation cannot occur if the only alternative to the elites in power are the Islamists. For this reason western policies should find ways to help liberal movements and secular forces to become political alternatives to Islamism.

Liberal movements in the Arab world do exist, although most of them are still in an embryonic state. Arab liberals have been very active in the last twelve months producing half a dozen declarations on the need for broad political, social and economic reform. The combination of declining economic, political and security conditions in the region with increased western attention has emboldened the Arab liberal movement, producing non-governmental calls for reform that are unprecedented in their number, comprehensiveness and explicit focus on democracy and reform. The Bibliotheca

Alexandrina Declaration in March 2004 is, in this context, a good example of this process. Analysts are divided over whether Arab liberals can succeed in having a real impact on the contemporary Arab political and cultural scene. But these liberals are currently fighting to retain the last foothold that their values still have in the Arab world. Their efforts should be supported.

It is clear that not all Arab countries are equally prepared to open up their political systems. Only liberal autocracies are capable of starting the long and difficult process of transition to democracy. This process will require political will, which seems to be missing today, and a policy of democratic gradualism designed to create a real political society. That will require the establishment of representative and efficient political parties; support for political forces that uphold liberal interpretations of Islam; the consolidation of the rule of law, responsibility and accountability; the promotion of freedom of speech and press, and last but not least, assistance in developing a vibrant civil society that should include Islamic political activists who renounce political violence.

A democratic Middle East will have to integrate its Islamist opposition because its members are important actors in the political landscape of the Arab world. But since one of the basic requirements of democracy is regular transitions of elected representatives, Islamist movements will have to consolidate their process of ideological innovation, accepting the possibility of giving up power if they lose elections, and recognising pluralism as a strategic option. Only through accepting these changes could the Islamists overcome their lack of credibility among other political forces. Without this credibility it will be difficult to realise the political pacts necessary to guarantee the success of any policy of democratic gradualism.

Finally, the different initiatives of the West to support reform in the Middle East should recognise that pursuit of a good governance agenda devoid of democratic promotion will end up perpetuating existing authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, good governance in Arab countries requires full-fledged democratisation. It is hence necessary to design new instruments to strengthen and expand political pluralism, and to support civil society. Pro-democratic NGOs and liberal and secular forces have to be encouraged and dialogue with the moderate Islamists established. A more proactive policy is necessary if we really want to promote democracy in the Middle East.

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