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Democratic Reform in the Arab World

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Democracy building remains an uphill struggle in Arab countries, yet this doesn't mean a sort of incompatibility between Islam and Democracy. Indeed there is no inherent contradiction between Islam and democracy. Democratic ideals and principles are also Islam's ideals and principles. Thus, the explanation of why so many Muslim countries are not democratic lies in historical, political, cultural, and economic factors, not religious ones. (Abdou Filali-Ansary, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: The Challenge of Secularization," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1996, pp. 76-80).

So not only must we understand these reasons, but we must also find out what needs to be done to correct this situation. Is it possible to develop a sort of guidance to the process of democratization in the Arab World?

Indeed, no American administration has talked more about democracy in the Middle East than the Bush administration. However the situation in Arab countries needs to be examined carefully in order to embark on the process of democratization in a proper way. The US Secretary of State Colin Powell suggested in his November 2002 "Middle East Partnership Initiative," and in the subsequent statement he gave to the Arab press, that the United States will work with Arab leaders to carefully and slowly reform their autocracies.

The Problem of Democracy in the Arab World

Progress in liberalizing societies, modernizing institutions, and developing infrastructures is generally slow and limited in the Arab World. Worldwide democratic trends have in most cases failed to transform authoritarian and patriarchal political cultures in Arab countries. Military officers, westernized elites, and tribal/traditional leaders usually keep a monopoly over state power. This is most evident in political violence, violations of human rights, and abuse of public office.

Despite the rather bleak situation at present, there are grounds for hope. Education is having a significant impact. In addition, there are strong pressures toward liberalization, both because the media continuously provide alternative models from other countries and because Arab states can no longer function without fundamental structural reforms and without more effective partnerships being developed between the government and the governed.

The key to understanding the root cause of the democracy predicament in Arab countries does not lie in the text or in the tradition of Islam but in the context of modernity, politics, and culture. In that respect, four points could be made: **First**, that the greatest threat to democracy in the Arab world comes not from Islam but from economic, political, and educational forces. **Second**, democracy struggles in the Arab world will be lost or won on the national level, not on the international level.

Third, weak civil society structures and authoritarian regimes are now perceived, by the west, as sources of terrorism. Consequently, it is believed that, if western countries want to suppress terror then they have to foster civil society and support those movements that call for changes within the repressive political systems. Finally, Western countries can and will apply economic and political pressures on these authoritarian regimes to encourage fundamental change.

Liberalized vs. Full Autocracies

Two types of autocracies could be distinguished, full and liberalized autocracies. Full autocracies or dictatorships have zero tolerance for free debate or competitive politics. Indeed, in full autocracies dissent warrants jail, or worse, execution. By contrast, the liberal autocracies of the Arab world temper authoritarianism with pluralism. They are liberal in the sense that their leaders not only tolerate but also promote a measure of political openness in civil society, in the press, and even in the electoral system of their country. Elections give opposition leaders a chance to compete, to enter parliaments, and, what is more, occasionally to serve as ministers. But they are autocratic in that their rulers always retain the upper hand. They control the security establishment, dominate the media, and dole out economic goodies to their favorite clients. With their ultimate reliance on the supreme authority of the monarch or president, liberalized autocracies provide a kind of virtual democracy. It isn't clear how such autocracies may be reformed, encouraging rapid change, such as completely free elections, might invite radical forces and even a retreat to full autocracy.

Characteristics of Liberalized Autocracies:

1) Partial Legitimacy and National Reconciliation

The goal of state-managed liberalization is to give opposition groups a way to blow off steam. The steam valve must meet opponents' minimal expectations for political openness and participation but prevent them from undermining the regime's ultimate control. In an ideal sense, it might be said that such limitations on political action undercut the legitimacy of liberalized autocracy. But for countries trying to exit a period of conflict, even an experiment in state-controlled opening can create space for political dialogues and accommodation in ways that give liberalized autocracies a measure of legitimacy—at least at the outset. For example, after Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981, president Hosni Mubarak embarked on a political opening that brought many of Sadat's critics into the political arena. The leaders of Jordan, Kuwait, and Algeria have completed this model. In the wake of Jordan's 1989 bread riots, the late King Hussein oversaw the creation of a National Charter to define the new parameters of a more open political system. He then held national elections in the modern history of the country.

These initiatives not only helped secure a measure of social and political peace at home, they also made it easier for regimes to gain U.S. economic and military support. From Washington's perspective, such political openings represent a major step forward. Thus, for both Arab and American leaders, liberalization—minus substantive democracy—came to be viewed as a winning formula.

State-managed political liberalization works because it entails real, if partial and limited, reforms in civil society, the economy, the electoral system, and parliament. These reforms bring additional benefits to the regimes in question, and to some extent, to their opposition as well. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that both sides get something out of the bargain that partly explains the endurance of liberalized autocracy.

2) Partial Reform of Civil Society Laws and Organizations

Liberalized autocracies not only permit but also promote the growth of nongovernmental or quasi-governmental organizations. Where centralized states can no longer provide adequate schooling or social and health services, regimes will encourage civic organizations to assume some of these tasks.

(Of course, the state retains ultimate control of the purse strings.) Striking just the right balance requires "reforming" those laws that define how civic, professional, and labor associations govern and finance their activities. Yet such reforms often place "civil society organizations" in a strange limbo, partly autonomous, partly captured.

Still, for many social activists in the Arab world, this is not a bad trade off. Because they often lack independent sources of finance or get in trouble when they acquire foreign funds. They sometimes learn to tolerate such ambiguous laws. Regimes, in

turn, not only retain final control; they further divide the opposition. After all, it is better to have 5,000 small civil society organizations than five big ones, since many competing NGOs impede social activists' cooperation. This is one reason why in the 1990s the rulers of Morocco and Egypt fostered the growth of thousands of semi-independent organizations. Democracy promoters encouraged this trend because they mistakenly assumed that civil society organizations had the capacity to push for democratic changes. What these democracy promoters failed to recognize is that such organizations could not compensate for the absence of well-organized political parties or truly representative parliaments.

3) Partial Economic Reforms:

By bringing a variety of social and professional groups into the political arena, liberal autocracies also create space for partial economic reforms. During the 1980s and 1990s, decreasing oil revenues, rising foreign debts, and the paralysis of state-run industries all created a strong impetus to reinvigorate the private sector. Liberalized autocracies from Rabat to Amman looked to the business community to encourage foreign investment in ailing economies. This strategy often left many public sector industries intact since Arab leaders did not want to provoke an outcry from the many groups who would have paid a price for structural reforms, such as labor, state bureaucrats, and public sector managers. Such partial reforms have slowly expanded the private sectors in Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan for example, by attracting some foreign and domestic investment, but they haven't removed the actual causes of economic crises.

4) Partial Reform of Parliaments and Electoral Systems:

To attract a modicum of legitimacy and popular support, liberalized autocracies almost always allow elections and the creation of parliaments. More or less regular national elections have been held in Morocco since the 1960s, Egypt since 1976, Jordan since 1989, Kuwait since 1991, and Yemen since 1993. But elections and parliaments do not make a democracy. **The essential elements for democracy are political parties that speak for organized constituencies, parliaments that have the constitutional authority to speak on behalf of the electorate, and constitutions that impose limits on executive authority.** Because all three of these fundamental requirements are missing in the liberalized autocracies of the Arab world, no government in the region can credibly claim a democratic mandate.

The absence of strong political parties makes it difficult to build on the enthusiasm and hopes that a first round of competitive elections invariably generates. With the possible exception of some Islamist parties, the Arab world lacks strong political parties that can mobilize and-most important-sustain a mass following. Parties may

exist in name, but in practice their leaders are usually drawn from the elite who have close family, personal, or economic ties to the rulers, but little support in society itself. Such state-focused ties are buttressed by pay-offs, favors, and bribes to ensure that most "opposition" politicians will only rarely defy the ruling authority. Moreover, when opposition groups do begin exhibiting excessive independence—as in Jordan and Kuwait during the early and mid-1990s—liberal autocracies have all kinds of mechanisms on hand to deal with such upstarts.

The most important of these mechanisms are constitutions and the autocratic laws they sanction. Constitutions in most of the Arab World aren't a guarantor of civil rights, but they are written to ensure that the president or king has ultimate power and parliaments are more like debating societies than law-making institutions. Parliaments lack the constitutional authority to actually represent the will of the elected. The laws passed by parliaments in liberalized autocracies almost always reflect the wishes of the president and his allies, or the king and his princes; therefore, many of these laws are explicitly designed to enhance state power and punish dissent.

In liberalized autocracies, leaders are not so much above the law as they are its creator and ultimate dispenser. It is the job of parliaments to rubber-stamp these laws, and it is the mission of state-controlled judiciaries to enforce them. Even if appellate courts occasionally defy the will of the executive (as has happened in Egypt), at the end of the day they know their place. What is more, this entire legal machinery is sanctioned by constitutions replete with loopholes that provide for "complete freedom of speech and assembly"—so long as those freedoms do not exceed certain red lines. In a way, such conditioned liberties guarantee freedom of speech but not freedom after speech.

Costs of Liberalized Autocracies:

We can briefly assess the costs that accrue from the partial reform of civil society, the economy and the electoral field as such:

1) Ideologically Fragmented Civil Society and Weak Political Society

One of the most significant costs of partial civil society reform is the aggravation of ideological conflicts. In the Arab world, many human rights organizations, women's associations, and even "nonpolitical" environmental groups are most of the time, torn by disputes pitting Marxists, liberal secularists, Arab nationalists, Islamists, tribes, or ethnic groups against one another. Such an ideological conflict is a by-product of a system that inhibits the growth of political society (that is, an independent realm of political parties that can mobilize constituencies that have a stake in what their leaders say and do).

Also because liberalized autocracies lack effective parties, they create an incentive for civil society organizations to take up political roles for which they are badly suited. In

Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan, professional syndicates often spend more time championing rival ideologies than using their expertise to solve concrete problems.

2) Costs of Partial Economic Reforms

Partial economic reforms exact long-term costs. Because they often open the economy to private sector investment while leaving public sector industries largely intact, they create a dualistic economy whose inefficient public sector industries and bureaucracies continue to cost governments millions of dollars. Moreover, because partial economic reforms leave bureaucrats in charge, the resulting red tape and corruption discourages more productive forms of private investment and trade. The real moneymakers are the new businessmen who rake in quick profits from real estate, the import of luxury and consumer goods, and currency speculation. Finally, partial economic reforms, without democratization, do not ensure transparency and the visible profit making of the ruling establishment causes resentment and actually stokes the flames of Islamic fundamentalism more.

3) Partial Political Reform: A Big Trap?

The biggest price of liberalized autocracy is political. The longer liberalized autocracies depend on weak political parties and impotent legislatures, the more difficult it becomes to move from state managed liberalization to genuine democratization. Since where you can go depends on where you have been, the very success of liberalized autocracy can become a trap for even the most well intentioned leader. Among the negative consequences of partial political reform are: reinforcing Islamist power, increased ideological confusion and weak legitimacy, sometimes even growing civil conflict, and a state of a transition to nowhere. Because most autocrats (and even some opposition groups) are loath to give up the benefits of partial reform, they tend to sometimes to flirt with, but never cross, the line into full autocracy. Instead, they go through unstable cycles of opening and closing, liberalization and de-liberalization.

The duration of these cycles depends in part on how much threat their leaders perceive. But what does not happen is a decisive move forward that would allow regimes and oppositions to define a new political system based on a common set of values and aspirations. This is the biggest problem liberalized autocracy creates: It snares regimes in an endless transition that eventually diminishes achievements even when "new" era of reconciliation, openness, and reform are inaugurated.

How to exit the trap?

While liberalized autocracy can be a trap, the severity of this trap varies from country to country. And, since some Arab states are more trapped than others, the cost they pay for trying to get un-trapped also varies. The challenge is to devise a rough guide

that will help us distinguish where and when a go-slow approach is preferable, and where and when more radical surgery may be in order. Among the factors such a guide should include are: the longevity of liberalized autocracies; the size of the population and the level of economic crisis; the level of political and institutional pluralism in civil society and party system; and the type of regime.

- ***Factor 1: Longevity.***

The longer Arab states bare the cost of liberalized autocracy, the harder it becomes to create functioning civil and political societies that encourage rival forces to find democratic ways to resolve their conflicts. Paradoxically, because success makes a move from liberalization to democracy risky, some of the most experienced liberalizers are likely to devise new kinds of "reform" to skirt democracy. Thus, for example, the goal of the current effort to reform Egypt's National Democratic Party (NDP) is not to democratize; rather, the goal of this reform is to infuse new blood into a ruling party whose political body has ossified. By contrast, regimes that have just embarked on political liberalization, such as in Bahrain and Qatar, have a window of opportunity to plant the institutional and constitutional seeds of political society and genuine parliamentary representation. In short, regimes that are less practiced in the art of survival are better placed than those with ample experience in devising a political liberalization strategy whose purpose is to open the door to democracy rather than close it.

- ***Factor 2: Size of Population and Level of Economic Crisis.***

Countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria-which boast huge populations and economies hamstrung by extensive public sector industries, corruption, and external debts-are not good candidates for a quick move from liberalized autocracy to competitive democracy. Having pursued a dualistic development strategy that has sown ever greater levels of social discontent, the leaders of big countries assume that any effort to deepen democracy by holding free elections will only create big problems by mobilizing the opponents of market reform. By contrast, smaller and richer countries are better placed to advance both market and political reforms. Of course, the source of wealth is also important. The oil-based economies of the Arab Gulf states link economic and political power in ways that inhibit political reform. Still, since countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar have great wealth and a small native population, their leaders have far more room to advance political reforms than their counterparts in states such as Egypt or Morocco.

- ***Factor 3: Level of Organized Pluralism.***

Civil society organizations, although they frequently foster liberalization, cannot substitute for the vital role that political parties must play in promoting democratization. While all liberalized autocracies have weak party systems, those that have promoted a more competitive electoral arena are better off than those that have limited competition. This point is especially important given the challenge posed by mainstream Islamist parties. As Morocco illustrates, where Islamist parties must compete with secular parties that command some measure of support, they pose less of a threat to the regime. Less threat makes more reform possible. By contrast, where they have been excluded from politics (as in Egypt), or where Islamists do not face significant competition from other secular, ethnic, or even Islamic opposition parties, the sudden entrance of Islamists into an open political arena will threaten the regime. Increased threat hinders a move from liberalized autocracy to real democratization.

- ***Factor 4: Regime Type.***

As noted, most monarchs are better positioned than most presidents to promote and facilitate reforms. The latter are usually wedded to ruling parties or ruling establishments that are loath to let go of "their" president and the authority he provides. By contrast (and with the exception of the monarchy in Saudi Arabia) most Arab kings are well placed to stand above the fray and thus encourage accommodation of opposition to the regime. Thus, the presidents of Egypt and Algeria are less likely to promote a move forward from liberalization to democracy, while the kings of Bahrain, Morocco, Kuwait, and Jordan have relatively more freedom to do so.

These four criteria suggest that recent liberalizers, such as Bahrain and Qatar, as well as more well-entrenched liberalized autocracies that benefit from the arbitrating role of monarchs, such as Kuwait and Morocco, are potential candidates for moving beyond liberalization toward democracy. Morocco's legacy of party competition, however imperfect, should also help lower the costs entailed in genuine democratization. Still, forward movement does not require a sudden leap into the unknown. Rather, it requires carefully targeted constitutional and legal reforms that give parliament and political parties real authority to represent their constituency. Broader educational reforms that promote democratic and pluralistic values are also necessary. These reforms would give electoral systems and the parliament they create the kind of legitimacy they sorely need.

Such bold changes will also require bold leadership from reformers who are ready to seize opportunities when they arise. Recent liberalizers, such as those in Bahrain and Qatar, have a chance to avoid ensnaring themselves in the kinds of traps that more experienced liberalizers have fostered. Though, the signals from both countries (such

as the banning of political parties) suggest that their leaders have chosen the liberalized autocracy path, as when it comes to practice, even the most visionary reformers will have difficulty switching to competitive democracy.

By contrast, the leaders of Algeria, Egypt, and to some extent Jordan are candidates for a more incrementalist approach. As they face daunting economic challenges, as their Islamists would make gains in open elections without facing significant competition from non-Islamist parties, and as their leaders face growing discontent over regional conflicts in Israel-Palestine and Iraq, any effort to push for rapid political change would only set the stage for regime opposition conflicts and thus more deliberalization.

That said, a go-slow approach should not be limited to the same old reforms the United States has promoted before. Colin Powell in effect listed those very reforms in his "Middle East Partnership" speech. They include the usual suspects: civil society building, promoting women's political participation, and of course, accelerating economic development. These are all good things. But even a go-slow approach must tackle more fundamental political challenges, such as party development, educational reforms, promoting the rule of law, and pressing for constitutionally mandated organizations to protect human rights.

CONCLUSION

Promoting democracy abroad is not something new for the U.S. government. Indeed it has been estimated that since World War II, the US has interfered into the affairs of other states, for democracy purposes, for 35 times. Only one of them has succeeded, namely the case of Colombia in Latin America, as the US considered itself a partner in the war against drug production in that country, which means a success ratio of less than 3%. The remaining cases ended up in a much worse positions than before the American intervention such as Guatemala, Nicaragua and Thailand. Reasons behind that failure are attributed to the fact that the US seeks a tailored democracy that fits US interests first, no doubt about that. (George W. Downs and Bruce de Mesquita, Gun-Barrel Democracy Has Failed Time and Again, *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.4, 2004, p. B.13).

Yet to limit that influence certain lessons are in place. Perhaps the most important lesson is that there is no single prescription that will ensure a transition to democracy. Local conditions vary enormously. So, it will be necessary to develop country-specific plans to promote democracy. Whatever the approach, Washington will not be able to simply impose its preferences on the region. Actually, there are five recommendations that the US should consider:

1) Increase substantially both the proportion and the amount of U.S. foreign assistance that is spent on promoting democracy in the Arab World. It is important to note that simply spending more is not a solution by itself. To succeed the United States must demand accountability from the recipient governments. The question then becomes, is the United States willing to have a more adversarial relationship with regional leaders, and perhaps to see some of them overthrown, as part of the messy process of promoting democracy? These leaders, after all, are valued because they are seen as assisting in the protection of vital U.S. national interests.

2) Provide governments and other key interest groups in Arab societies with incentives to encourage democratic reforms. A major commitment to foreign assistance to the Arab world by the U.S. government would provide an attractive incentive to recipient governments to embark on the path to reform. Foreign assistance should be linked to clear progress in strengthening institutions of accountability. Here domestic interest groups independent of existing power elites take on a particular importance, because existing leaders typically have little interest in diluting their own privileges. When providing foreign assistance, the U.S. government must insist that there be a free press, that the judiciary be independent, and that civil society organizations operate free from governmental interference

3) Incentives should come not in the form of aid alone, which inevitably has some patronizing connotations. Real partnerships, especially in the field of trade, and also in a host of other areas, including cultural and educational ones, are also important. Turkey, as a Muslim country that shares some cultural commons with Arab countries, is a good example here. The positive impact on democratic reforms of Turkey's accession process to the European Union is a good case in point. Because many sectors of Turkish society anticipate benefits from EU membership, there has been a considerable groundswell of support for the stringent reforms required by the European Commission. The process of change has been and is painful to many entrenched interests. Nevertheless, the business community has put pressure on the government to press forward with political as well as economic reforms. Business elites, who recognize the benefits of participating in the global marketplace, and who also recognize that the price of entry is compliance with international standards, are a largely untapped resource for democratic change

4) Take seriously the existing framework of multilateral agreements and treaties that bear on democratization, such as those in the field of human rights. Since there is great skepticism over the U.S. government's motives in promoting democracy in the Arab world, it is wise to disarm doubters by embracing multilateral approaches with like-minded governments wherever possible. Treaty bodies within UN human rights mechanisms-like the Human Rights Committee and the Committee Against Torture, which oversee state compliance with treaties like the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights, and the Convention Against Torture and other Forms of Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment-are highly regarded for the integrity of the work of their members, who sit as independent experts. Yet these effective bodies are chronically under funded. Members operate with little or no research support and their findings are virtually unknown beyond the world of human rights specialists. It would surely be a sound investment for the U.S. government to lend its financial and political support to the work of these under-appreciated institutions. (Advancing Human Rights and Peace in a Complex World, Special Report, SR86, April 22, 2002, US Institute of Peace)

5) Promote regional accountability mechanisms. The Arab world is lacking in regional accountability mechanisms. The great virtue of such mechanisms is that they cannot be accused of being alien or inauthentic because they are of the region over which they exercise jurisdiction. Turkey provides an example of the merits of such mechanisms. One of the reasons for Turkey's advantage over Arab states in its progress towards democratization, is its longstanding participation in the human rights mechanisms of the Council of Europe, especially its acceptance of the right of individual citizens to petition the European Court of Human Rights and its agreement to be bound by the rulings of the court. The benefits go beyond the individual cases that have been heard before the court. Turkey's legal community and human rights organizations increasingly know and make use of the fact that there is a functioning mechanism for them to resort to in the face of state violations. The United States should make great efforts to promote effective regional mechanisms of accountability within existing regional institutions like the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

For the foreseeable future, the United States will have to work with Arab leaders whose principle concern will be to shore up their legitimacy in the wake of a highly unpopular war in Iraq which has reinforced the influence of radical Arab nationalists and Islamists. In the short run, it is expected that Arab leaders will resist Washington's calls for political reform, but in the medium and the longer term, the question of domestic political reform will emerge as a central issue throughout the Arab world. When this moment comes, Washington will have to face some difficult decisions about how to encourage both regimes and oppositions to think beyond the day-to-day politics of political survival. This will require paying close attention to the costs and benefits of liberalized autocracy.