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Democracy in the Arab World

The awakening of the Arab world was a process which captivated the attention of millions around the globe. Similar to the de-Communization of the Eastern bloc that started in the 1980s, the people of the Arab world revolted because of apparent weaknesses in the political regimes under which they languished. When protests erupted across Tunisia in late 2010, few were even prepared to consider this as anything more than an isolated incident. In January 2011, Ben Ali of Tunisia was forced to step down and even then, few in the Egyptian government were willing to consider the same happening in Egypt. Less than a month later, Hosni Mubarak, president of Egypt, would step down after a humiliating 18-day revolution that called for regime change. Since then, at least five Arab countries have undergone drastic reforms as a result of widespread protests. At the centre of all this was a desire for genuine political reforms and an implementation of transparent democratic systems.

Many, however, remain sceptical of whether democracy can succeed in the Arab world.

Naysayers point to the Gaza Strip elections which bought militant Islamists to power, and to the failure of democratic elections to induce stability in post-Saddam Iraq. Others cling to the perception that Islam as a militant religion that suppresses democracy and point to the realities on the ground in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. However, many in the Arab world *do* champion democratic reforms, and see them as a means of ending the corrupt regimes that had held power for so long. As the Arab world inches towards greater overall political reform, it is necessary to understand the history of democracy in the Arab world, which spans a

period of nearly a hundred and fifty years. Despite the pressures of unaccommodating political regimes in the Arab world, democracy remains vibrant to public discourse and has been well-documented by countless scholars and political scientists.

Modern democracy in the Arab world has its roots in the middle of the 19th century. At the time, what is now referred to as the Arab world was under Ottoman rule and was undergoing a radical cultural re-awakening that coincided with what is referred to as the ‘first wave of Arab democratization’ (Laribi 60). The 1798 Napoleonic expedition in Egypt had marked the beginning of the modern Middle East, for the West as much as for its residents. Increased East-West contact meant the adoption of institutions modelled along Western lines; for the West, the Arab world was a new region that could heavily influence-and in time dominate-politically, culturally and economically. Mohammed Ali of Egypt had brought in Western experts to advise on everything-from reforming Egypt’s agricultural sector to creating a formidable military. His successors continued his policies, and elite students were sent to European universities to receive the only type of education that mattered-a Western one. The rapid adoption of European policies soon extended to reforming the political systems to reflecting their Western models. Scholars have drawn on Samuel P. Huntington’s model that democratization takes place in ‘waves’ that can be identified (Kurzman 42-44). Using Huntington’s model, one can identify three waves of democratization in the Arab world.

The first wave of democracy in the Arab world began in the 1860s. In 1868, an assembly in Egypt was appointed via the Arab world’s first election (Laribi 61-63). The electoral system was adopted to suit Egypt by having the village headman, or *‘umda*, elect the assembly. A few years prior to that, Muhammed Bey, viceroy of Ottoman Tunisia, adopted the Arab world’s first constitution. However, such reforms would prove to be little more than mere window dressing. In the words of noted Middle East history scholar Elias Kedourie, the Egyptian Khedivate’s assembly merely represented ‘the façade of constitutionalism with its

reality' (qtd. in 63). The main reason behind this failure was that the Arab world was simply too underdeveloped for democracy to take root. Despite the modern trappings of railways, telegraph lines and the creation of an elite bourgeoisie, the majority of the Arab world remained illiterate. Even in the homes of Western-educated families, females continued to be relegated to the harem. Democracy in the 19th century was only for a select few countries, countries in which the working classes and of course women were barred from participating in political life. The absence of democracy in the Arab world at the time is not an anomaly, but merely in keeping with the rate of political development around the world. The first wave of democratization ended abruptly in the early 1880s when Tunisia and Egypt were occupied by France and Britain, respectively. Despite the limited humanitarian reforms the colonial powers attempted to initiate (such as improve the standing of peasants, and quell the slave trade) in their dominions, genuine political reforms that could counter their influence were of course greatly discouraged. Already, voices within the Islamic world sought to reform and modernize, only from an Islamic outlook, began to mobilize intellectually. Jamal-al-Din al Afghani was such a voice. He believed that only by reforming itself and ridding itself of its decadence could the Arab world transcend the limitations of its primitive environment to achieve the intellectual freedom and modernity of the West (Armstrong 156-162).

Furthermore, Afghani believed that by simply copying the West, Arabs and Muslims would be overrun by an alien culture. He was aware of the paradox that to modernize, Arabs would have to import the technical know-how from the West to advance technologically. This, to him, 'was proof of our inferiority and decadence. We civilize ourselves by imitating the Europeans' (qtd. in Armstrong 157). The dependence of the Middle East on the West was at this point going beyond the digging of the Suez Canal or the incorporation of raw commodities (such as cotton) into international markets. Arabs were now pegged to Westerners intellectually. The Egyptian nationalist movement that began in the 1870s took

place when there was no foreign occupation, but strove to assert Egypt's burgeoning status as a nation-state free of foreign influence. In the words of Tarek El-Bishri, 'Egyptians came to see independence and democracy as two sides of the same coin' (33).

Democracy and the principles of intellectual liberty, however, remained the exclusive prerogatives of the West. Many felt, and continue to feel, that democracy was an alien Western concept that could not be applied in the Arab world. It was not just the Arabs who felt this way. Western colonial administrators continued to lament the shortcomings of the Oriental mentality, using this as proof that Arabs (and other colonial subjects) were incapable of self-government or democracy.

The second wave of reforms was far more genuine in substance, and began with the commencement of the post-independence Egyptian constitutional monarchy in 1922. As decolonization shot through the Arab world, each of the newly independent states, without exception, experienced some level of genuine political reform. Former Ottoman dominions mandated to either France or Britain during the inter-war period all experienced bouts of national resistance loosely linked to the prospects of democratic self-rule, all in keeping with Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points which had lulled many into a false sense of hope. The democracies in the Arab world during the second wave were fragile, to say the least. The shaky status quo in Egypt agreed upon by the British, the King and the monarchy resulted in successively weak governments, most of which were dissolved (El-Bishri 33). Democratic life was also weakened by sour Anglo-Egyptian relations and a noticeable degree of ministerial and parliamentary instability (Youssef 31). Although the system was far from perfect, the record was quite favourable for a country which had to transition to democracy virtually overnight. Constantly undermined by the British, Egyptian political leaders were very often constrained and could not exercise their constitutional rights. However, it is worthy to note that had Egypt remained a constitutional monarchy, and given the benefit of

hindsight that British influence would have eventually dwindled after WWII, it is tempting to think that Egypt could have seen its nascent democracy become the backbone of a viable political regime. The second wave of democracy in Egypt ended in 1952 with the military coup that would eventually abolish the monarchy, ban all political parties, censor the press and bring Gamal Abdel Nasser to power.

In Lebanon, a confessional political system had been adopted as early as 1926, which specified a balance of power between the different sects in Lebanon. Initially, Lebanese nation-makers strove to create a country modelled on liberal lines, and enjoyed a free press. However, both internal and external pressures led to the termination of democratic life with the start of the civil war in 1975. Iraq, Syria and Libya, despite holding parliamentary elections and in Iraq and Libya's case being constitutional monarchies, would succumb to tribal rivalries and military dictatorships that would mark the end of the second wave, that across the whole Arab world would come to a halt as a result of coups, regicides and in some cases outright bans on political parties.

The third wave is more difficult to classify, but one can consider the period 2005-2008 to coincide with the third wave. In 2005, Egypt held its first multi-party presidential elections, in which the ruling National Democratic Party's incumbent candidate Hosni Mubarak was elected for a fifth term. The same year, the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood party won 88 seats in the People's Assembly, a win which seemed to reflect their popularity with the common man on the street. However, the elections were only part of a series of cosmetic changes to appease the Bush administration's pressures for greater democratization. The first parliamentary and presidential elections in post-war Iraq may have been transparent, but they did little to change the reality on the ground. The US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, which in part was justified on the grounds that toppling the Saddam Hussein regime would 'bring democracy' to Iraqis was extremely unpopular in the Arab world. For some, this was

evidence that democracy was an alien concept that the West was using as a tool to subjugate; for others, growing dissatisfaction with the brutality of the ruling regimes was sufficient grounds for the argument that democracy was necessary.

In the Arab Gulf, only Kuwait has a political system that allows its citizens to consistently engage in meaningful politics. In 2006, the UAE held its first elections, in which its citizens elected half of the Federal National Council. However, those elected held only advisory powers and no legislative or executive powers.

Since the second half of the 20th century, almost every single Arab country has been under a military dictatorship. In many cases, the military rulers shed their military uniforms and donned civilian garb, in a way to consolidate their legitimacy as rulers. However, military rule continued to prevail; in the mid-1970s Sadat may have liberalized the political system by allowing political parties but his designated successor was a military man, ensuring that power would remain in the military's hands after he was gone.

If the three mentioned phases can be classified as 'waves' then the period of rapid transformation that began in late 2010 can be described as a tsunami of titanic proportions. Tunisia, despite friendly relations with the West and what appeared to be a stable economy, was the first to erupt. On January 25th 2011, protests and marches began in Egypt. They were not the first to take place in recent years, and for that reason, many dismissed them as being nothing more than 'a tempest in a teapot'. Mubarak, a key pro-Western ally in the region, was the leader of what was perceived as one of the most 'stable' regimes in the Arab world. The revolts that brought down his regime were joined by Egyptians of all walks of life. The inability of the Mubarak regime to engage with the everyman and the widespread tales of nepotism and corruption had led to a radical rethinking. Ironically, it was George W. Bush, an oft-vilified figure in the Arab media, who first put pressure on client regimes in the Arab world to engage in a democratization process. The eminent political scientist and media

figure Amr Hamzawy remarked in an address at the American University in Cairo in May 2011 that to the world at large, it had seemed that the Arab world was the only region immune to democratization. Following the emergence of democracy in Latin America and Communist Europe in the 1980s, and parts of Asia and Africa in the 1990s, the Arab world remained the only region that did not have a country that could be classified as a democracy (Hamzawy).

What is it that many in the Arabs are against democracy? Quite simply, they perceive democracy as a Western tool serving Western ends. Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East and North Africa, has a vibrant and truly open democratic system, but the atrocities it commits in the occupied Palestinian territories-which are condemned by the international community-undermines this reputation. It is therefore unsurprising when Arabs remain sceptical of democracy when they are told that Israel, which is perceived as a brutal and oppressive power, is a beacon of democracy. Arabs in Israel constitute around 20% of the population, but lag behind their non-Arab counterparts in terms of economic and social development. Azmi Bishara, a then-member of the Knesset, called on Israelis to ‘return Palestine to us and take your democracy with you. We Arabs are not interested in it’ (qtd. in Shaked). Clearly there are obstacles to overcoming the somewhat common conception that democracy need only serve Western interests. Adherents to this school of thought seem to override the existence of democracies in the non-Western, non-aligned world, such as India during the Cold War era.

It is generally accepted that democracy is frowned upon in the Gulf, and traditional supporters of the Mubarak regime, such as Saudi Arabia, were reluctant to support the protesters in Tahrir Square. Following the protests in Bahrain, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council sent in troops to quell the rebellion.

There is the perception in the Arab world that democracy is a Western invention that even

when applied in a non-Western context serves primarily Western interests. Incidentally, then Arabic name for the West, *al-gharb*, is derived from *ghareeb*, meaning the unknown. At the same time, *gharb* refers to the place where the sun sets, also a metaphor for darkness (Laribi).

The Arab world is on the cusp of a breakthrough, unprecedented in scope and reach. As discussed, Arab-Islamic political culture is not inherently against pluralism and democracy; if anything, pluralism is a core aspect of Islam. According to Islamic scholar Abdulazziz Sachedina, 'religious tolerance is a divinely ordained principle' that stipulates that rule is only legitimized by community consensus. Furthermore, within Islam exists a 'divinely ordained equivalence and equal rights of all human beings' (22-29). In practice, rulers in the Islamic world have largely ignored this principle. One must make the distinction that the problem does not lie with Islam, but rather with the rulers, who have been enforcing autocratic rule for centuries. Over time, the line separating that distinction has been blurred. Of course, Islamic rulers in the past have used religion as a means of keeping their subjects under their thumb. After all, did Karl Marx not say 'religion is the opium of the people'? This was not exclusive to the Muslim world; in Christian Europe, rulers maintained that their rule was ordained by God Himself, and that opposing this amounted to heresy.

One must also address the cultural divisions found within the Arab world. Many countries like Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia are often fragmented into various tribal and sectarian sects that until the 20th century had been more or less autonomous when under nominal Ottoman rule. With the advent of colonialism, the Western powers attempted to centralize governance. The establishment of telegraph and railway lines often encroached their territorial and cultural space and eroded what autonomy they had. Following the independence of the Arab world, these tribal divides did not go away-if anything, tensions continued to mount, resulting in devastating conflicts in countries like Lebanon. The existence of the tribal structure does not necessarily mean that democracy is not possible. Democracy would be achievable

through creating a framework that could incorporate the diversity found in many Arab countries.

For full-blooded democracy to achieve fruition, Arab citizens will have to politicize themselves as they transition from passive subjects to the rulers of tomorrow. If recent events are anything to go by, this may very well happen sooner rather than later.

The ‘Arab Spring’ that began in 2011 has led many to ask whether this is the start of a fourth wave of democratization. Like the Arab world, Communist Eastern Europe had been another frozen political space when in the 1980s the Communist centralized regimes were replaced by democratic regimes. The uprisings were spontaneous and highly symbolic; one can easily draw parallels between the Berlin Wall and Tahrir Square and their significance in the revolutions in East Germany and Egypt, respectively. However, the transition between autocracy and democracy in the Arab world has stalled in recent months. The military in Egypt has not engaged in any meaningful steps that would lead to democracy. On the contrary, the military has turned a blind eye to the escalating sectarian divisions within the country and has been cracking down on bloggers and political activists critical of the military. This could be part of a long-term strategy in which they seek to protect their interests and influence (Diamond). In Bahrain, the West was conspicuously silent when Bahraini governmental forces opened fire on the opposition, believing that the opposition was backed by Iran, who if they came to power would be detrimental to US security interests in the region (Bahrain is home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet). This was an assumption-the majority of the protestors *were* Shi’a but that does not necessarily imply that they are anti-Western or that they aspire to come under Iranian hegemony. It is clear that there are elements from within and outside the Arab world who actively seek to undermine the current wave of democratization. The Egyptian military leadership, heavily dependent on American military largesse, could end up like the Pakistani military-pulling the string behind a façade of

democratic government. It remains to be seen whether the Egyptian military leadership- threatened with the cut-off of US aid, will eventually aid and abet the transition to full democracy.

Jordan and Morocco, both pro-Western constitutional monarchies, have so far avoided Egyptian-style mass revolutions. However, both countries face high unemployment, dissatisfaction with the ruling elite and yearn for political change. What is certain is that the Arab Spring will lead to political change. The Syrian and Libyan leaderships have recently come under sanctions from the international community after the brutal suppression of uprisings in those countries. Both countries are notorious for their regimes' disregard of calls for change.

What is not certain is whether the fourth wave of democratization will actually lead to democracy. Following the collapse of Communism in Central Asia, many countries in that region have long since reverted back to autocratic rule. The political landscape in the Arab world, however, will continue to radically evolve for the days and months to come, and only time will tell whether the democratic will of the peoples of the Arab world can prevail.

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