

Conned by “Democracy”: The Middle East’s Stagnant ‘Change’

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Democracy in the Middle East continues to be a hugely popular topic of discussion. Its virtues are tirelessly praised by rulers and oppositions alike, by intellectuals and ordinary people, by political prisoners and their prison guards. Yet, in actuality, it also remains an illusion, if not a front to ensure the demise of any real possibility of public participation in decision-making.

Bahrain was the latest Arab country to hold free and fair elections. It managed a reasonable voter turnout of 67 percent. The opposition also did very well, winning 45 percent of the seats. In terms of fairness and transparency, the Bahraini elections could serve as an excellent example of how ‘things are changing’ in the Middle East. More, they might provide Western leaders, such as US President Barack Obama an opportunity to commend the contribution of American guidance to ‘progress’ in the region.

In actual fact, nothing is changing – except for the insistence by some that it is. Arab governments have made two important discoveries in the last decade.

The first discovery is that US interests cannot peacefully co-exist with true democracies in the region. Egypt had a rude awakening in 2005, when Muslim Brotherhood candidates won fifth of the votes, if not more. This was followed by the unmatched democratic revolution in Palestine when Hamas won the majority of the vote. The aftermath of both of these events was enough to remind both Arabs and the US of the folly of their so-called democracy project.

The second realization is that Arabs are not judged by the genuineness of their democracy; rather, the success of their democratic experiences is judged on the basis of how well they can serve and protect US interests. Since the democracy radar is measured by Washington, Arab countries deemed lacking in democratic reforms are often cited as promising and fledgling democracies in Congressional reports or White House statements. Countries deemed hostile to US economic and political interests are remorselessly shunned, as if their experiments with democracy could never yield anything of worth or consideration.

These two realizations led to a superficial change of course, forming a new trend that Shadi Hamid, writing in Foreign Policy, refers to as “free but unfair — and rather meaningless — election.”

Free elections are known to be the cornerstone of true democracy. Thus by giving the impression of freedom, automatically one tends to conclude fairness. But fairness is nowhere to be found, for if it truly exists then change becomes possible and is likely to

follow. Those who have followed the new democratic experiences of some Arab countries will have observed that they have also been defined by the same political stagnation of the pre-democracy years.

American journalist, Sydney J. Harris once wrote, "Democracy is the only system that persists in asking the powers that be whether they are the powers that ought to be." If Harris is correct, then whatever is underway in the Middle East is anything but democracy. Although new parliamentarians are elected, new faces flash on television, and an increasing number of women are paraded along with their male colleagues following each election, the powers that be remain unchanged, unhinged and truly unchallenged.

Most polls, whether conducted by Arab or non-Arab pollsters, indicate that the vast majority of Arab people view democracy in very positive terms. But the plot has truly thickened in recent years, when on the one hand democracy has become a household name in much of the Middle East, and not one ruler or government contests its virtues. Yet, no true democracy has in fact actualized in any shape or form.

Have Middle Eastern ruling elites figured out the democracy trick, the great con of our time? Have they realized that democracy in the Middle East is only what the White House says it can be?

Israel has mastered this very trick since the day of its inception. This is what Hasan Afif El-Hasan argues in his new and very instructive book, *Is the Two-State Solution Already Dead?* "The identity of the Israelis in their legal documents and ID cards is expressed in terms of their group religious affiliation as 'Jewish,' 'Muslim,' 'Christian', 'Bahai,' 'Durzi,' etc., where all privileges are conferred by the state on the Jews by virtue of being Jews, thus making Israel an religio-ethnocracy rather than a liberal democracy."

Israel's unique democracy is in fact getting more unique, as non-Jewish citizens of Israel are subjected to increasing levels of legal harassment and are constantly asked to jump through all sorts of political hoops to prove their loyalty to the Jewish state. Still, clever and persistent Israel has managed to present itself to the world at large, Arabs included, as being a model democracy.

This was and continues to be the original democracy con in the Middle East. It took some Arab governments decades to catch up and also present themselves as democratic, whatever the reality on the ground. This is not your everyday democracy scheme. It is particularly devious because it can boast of being free, fair and transparent – and the numbers would actually attest to that – but the political structure would still be construed in such a way that the freely elected parliaments are blocked from legislating effectively to challenge the powers that be. If any legislation is allowed to pass, through, say, unelected upper houses, and approved by the ultimate ruler (both usually serving as an insurance system against elected parliaments), it tends to be unimportant and largely decorative.

Since democracy is always a work in progress, for no country can claim to be perfectly democratic, then Middle East governments can always use this idea to justify their own shortcomings. Expectedly, the US tends to honor that, bestowing praise on their friends, and condemning their enemies – the former for courageously taking on democratic initiatives and the latter for failing the democracy test.

The great democracy con would not succeed, were it not for the fact that many players,

including the US, are so invested in its success. As for the ordinary people, who are eager to see their rights respected, freedoms honored, and political horizons expanded, well, they can always vote – even if only their vote actually counts for nothing, and only further validates the very system they are trying to change.

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