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Debate

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## THE PERSISTENCE OF ARAB AUTHORITARIANISM

*Burhan Ghalioun*

*Burhan Ghalioun is director of the Centre d'Etudes sur l'Orient Contemporain and professor of political sociology at the Sorbonne. He is the author of a dozen works on the politics and sociology of the Arab world including, most recently, Islam et politique: La modernité trahie (2003). The essay below was translated from the French by Philip J. Costopoulos.*

I should begin by saluting Alfred Stepan for steering clear (in his July 2003 essay in these pages) of the notion, widely broadcast in the Western media, that Islam and Arab culture are incompatible with democracy. Having said that, I wish to make three remarks. The first is that “quantitative” analyses founded on hard-to-evaluate concepts such as “competitive elections” do not seem pertinent to me, all the more so since the authoritarianism of Arab regimes is a commonplace of numerous academic studies going back more than twenty years.

My second remark is that the notion of competitive elections reveals little of the cruel realities of the oppression to which Arab societies have been subjected over the last three decades. In such societies, the question of power relations cannot be broached in the absence of free elections. Beyond the issue of dictatorship there is the complex problem of the almost complete rupture between governments that answer to no one—political predators unrestrained by law or morality—and those whom they govern, who find themselves reduced to a state of cruel marginalization and indeed slavery. These oppressed citizenries are denied the rights to express their opinions, to organize themselves freely in civic associations, and to take part in the making of decisions that affect their lives and futures.

The sorts of regimes that today predominate in the Arab world have nothing in common with the populist or nationalist regimes that inaugurated the postindependence era. Despite their authoritarian character, those populist regimes achieved grand transformations

upon the path of democratization and modernization. By eliminating the remnants of feudalism and aristocratic parasitism, by distributing land to peasants, by founding national state structures and administrative services, and by pushing economic modernization, they succeeded in gaining the trust and support of large sectors of the population, which saw in such regimes the stuff of emancipation and liberation. Their authoritarianism was almost hidden by their popularity.

This is not the case with the regimes that have replaced them. These newer regimes enjoy no popular support. They serve only the interests of the clans who hold power, they communicate in no way whatsoever with their citizenries, and they depend for their survival solely upon coercion and multiple security services. These regimes go beyond dictatorship; they put the state in the service of elites corrupted against the nation. Such an organization of power presupposes and demands the *dis*-organization—which is to say the oppression—of society. It is readily apparent that the problem here goes far beyond the absence of free elections.

My third remark is that the question of despotic power is inseparable from the whole syndrome of sociopolitical ills that afflicts the Arab lands. The democratic deficit that troubles the bulk of these countries is accompanied by a host of problems in other domains—economic, social, administrative, military, cultural, and educational. Bearing this in mind, we must take into view the whole of the system. Perhaps what we are seeing are aspects of that system's crisis or indeed failure. Despotism appears to be both a consequence of failure and the response favored by rulers faced with the resulting crisis—marked by weak or nonexistent economic growth, the degradation of the political and social climate, the decline of educational systems, and moral and ideological ruin. The culture of the elites cannot by itself explain the creation or evolution of these sociopolitical systems, and still less can it explain the crisis that is their consequence and complement.

The failure of these systems—whether in their patriarchal, monarchist version as in Saudi Arabia or their fascist, republican version as in the Ba'athist states—is the result of the stagnation of power, meaning the lack of any turnover or renewal of elites. Shielded from any contestation or even contestability, the existing powerholders of the Arab world have turned into a kind of hereditary aristocracy. They act as if they are the legitimate proprietors of whole states, whose resources and even populations the rulers may use according to their whims. This feudalization of modern states has come to such a pass that presidents and other high officials now do not hesitate to be seen grooming their own offspring to succeed them. Thus the same families and clans—without having to render an account to

anyone—retain power in the realm of politics, media, culture, and the economy.

The question arises whether this lack of alternation in power is the consequence of a culture—of peoples and their leaders—or whether it is the result of these countries' social, political, and geopolitical circumstances. It is my opinion that the feudalization of Arab regimes, the suppression of any stirrings of political life in its modern sense, and the return to older models are the results of the meeting of two processes: first, the long phase of modernization “from above” that left societies in political and moral disarray and many citizens cut off from the support and reference points provided by tradition; and second, the convergence of powerholders' interests with Western strategies for maintaining a strong and certain presence in this highly sensitive region of the globe. Thus authoritarian regimes served as a bulwark first against Soviet influence during the Cold War and then against a vast populist movement which, under the banner of Nasserism, opposed both the Western neocolonial presence and the supremacy of Israel. Still later, these same authoritarian regimes struggled against Muslim extremists attempting to succeed Arab nationalism by taking up its battle against a West that was blamed for Israeli expansionism, the region's lack of development, and the persistence of authoritarian governments.

Modernization in general, but more particularly when it is imposed from above, has certain perverse effects everywhere. Even as it reinforces centralized power by equipping it with new technical means of organization, management, and control, modernization undermines older sources of social solidarity and cohesion, leaving individuals helpless and adrift. Hence the state becomes stronger as it modernizes, while society grows more fragile. All transitional societies have lived through this paradoxical effect of modernization and found themselves imprisoned by their respective states, or rather by the elites most closely identified with state power. Yet sooner or later this tyrannical domination by centralized power provokes a revolt, and the appeal to democracy and against oppression ends up changing the system.

In the Arab world, particular circumstances have conspired to delay this break with authoritarianism. The fear of a return of anti-Western populism in one form or another, the desire to retain control over the world's most important petroleum reserves, and the increasing political and moral support of Israel and its military supremacy—all these factors have led the Western powers in general and the United States in particular to renew their ties with Arab regimes that seemed to display their effectiveness.

The foundering of populism and its mass movements after Nasser's death in 1970 left the civil societies of the Middle East practically bereft of any alternative when faced with the new authoritarian powers.

Bolstered by the disarray of civil society and encouraged by the material and political support of the West, those in power no longer felt uneasy. The inflow of oil and mineral rents, as well as salary remittances from nationals working abroad, allowed the powerholders to discount popular pressure. They had gained the means to create a clientelist stratum whose backing would help them bypass the need for popular support. Endowed with considerable resources and freed from any possibility of popular pressure, the Arab regimes could ignore public opinion, and did not have to worry about improving their governance or seeking public support. It seemed that their fate was tied to the benevolence of Western governments.

Thus it was that these regimes acquired a sense of being autonomous vis-à-vis their own societies. Some of these rulers and governments even thought that they could be independent of their Western allies: Such was the case with Saddam Hussein, who has paid dearly for it. For the others, however, with Saudi Arabia at their head, the United States has only had to brandish the threat of cutting its protégés loose to induce them hastily to elaborate so-called democratic reform programs that would have been unthinkable just months before. The Saudi foreign minister has even, in a recent speech, found it necessary to recall that the main cause behind the crisis of Arab societies is the lack of popular involvement in decision making.

This shows how heavily the strategic options chosen by the United States and Europe have weighed—and weigh still—upon the choices of elites, and hence upon the destiny of political systems, in this particularly strategic region of the world. Decades of tyranny and exclusion have left Arab civil societies highly disorganized, and they have not yet succeeded in reaching a new consensus.

### **A True Democratization of the Arab World?**

It is this conjunction between the disarray of civil societies and unconditional Western support for existing regimes that explains the problems besetting democratic transition in the Middle East. Since the 1980s, various movements of political and social contestation have made a stir throughout the Arab world. Several countries saw bread riots that gave way to strikes and political protests; assassinations, arrests, disappearances, and torture became current practices in most of them. Campaigns of blind repression caused the deaths of tens of thousands of citizens, and yet drew little notice from the democratic world's media and still less condemnation from its diplomats. For a long time, the democratic world turned a blind eye to atrocities committed by these tyrannical regimes. As U.S. president George W. Bush put it in a speech to the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003, Western nations spent sixty years “excusing and accommodating the lack of

freedom in the Middle East” because the democratic world had an interest in protecting regimes that seemed useful to Western strategy.

The “free world,” which never ceased to harry communist regimes on the question of liberties, and which has spared no effort, political or material, in the ex-communist lands of Central Europe and the former USSR—even going so far as accepting a large number of them for membership in the European Union—has made a different set of choices in the Arab region. Faced with the worsening oppression, social marginalization, and economic pauperization that are destabilizing Arab societies, Western capitals have fallen back on old standbys such as claims that Arab culture is incompatible with democratic values and that violence forms a natural part of this culture. The only transition that one could seek to impose on the Arab states would be the shift from planned economies to markets and private enterprise. Only on this economic level were Arab societies allowed to express their modernity and their adherence to universal standards.

When such circumstances are taken into account, it becomes easier to understand the failure of movements toward political and social contestation even as Muslim extremism has triumphed in their midst. The system was locked down so tightly that the forces of contestation had no choice other than letting themselves be crushed or becoming insurgents against the order that was oppressing them. If the vast bulk of the population has resigned itself to staying out of politics, other parties—a minority to be sure—have not hesitated to take up arms in order to topple the established order in the name of a more just order. This order is labeled “Islamist,” which is to say that it is grounded on the same values that have given the forces of contestation their unity and cohesion. That said, just as the failure of Arab democratization movements in the 1980s gave birth to the Islamist fundamentalist tidal wave, the defeats inflicted on this mass-based and hence political fundamentalism have given birth to an armed extremist Islamism that has come to represent its globalization.

Yet the spectacular and large-scale spread of violent Islamist contestation in the 1990s was unable to put matters right either for Arab societies (which now stand accused of having a cultural and religious inclination to favor terrorism) or for the domestic democratic forces in these countries, forces that found themselves caught in a pincers between official state terror and private Islamist terror. The first beneficiaries of this situation are the tyrannical Arab regimes: Henceforth they can depict themselves as the sole barrier against the spread of medieval Islamic obscurantism, and obtain from this fact even more support on the part of the West.

The situation of the 1990s recalled only too well that of the 1960s, when the very same Western powers threw their total support behind Israel and various archaic and conservative Arab regimes in order to

blunt the advance of Nasserite populist movements which, although secular, were seen at the time as a major threat to the Western presence in the Middle East. This explains the tragic fate of the democratic movement and its defenders in the Arab world. The game of arms replaces the game of politics and leaves no chance for a democratic perspective to emerge.

### **Despotism Provokes Anarchy**

Thus, until the new U.S. position announced by President Bush in March 2004 (motivated by complications in Iraq), the Arab regimes continued to benefit from the complaisance, and sometimes even the unconditional support, of the democratic world. These regimes were seen as the least bad, indeed as the only available allies, in a region bristling with threats to Western strategic interests. In order to guard against the risk that anti-Western regimes might arise, diplomats argued, there was no alternative but to support the existing powers. These diplomats thus confirmed what the Arab regimes never ceased to inscribe in reality—namely, that despotism provokes anarchy by systematically destroying all the political, civil, ethical, and moral bonds that ensure the endurance and stability of society.

The question that arises today, with the United States and Europe affirming their desire to break with their traditional policy of unconditional support for the tyrannical Arab regimes, is to what degree the establishment of democratic regimes in the Arab countries will better preserve vital Western interests. In other words, can the Western coalition live with representative democracies that truly express the will of the region's peoples, even as the West maintains its traditional positions on such major questions as the Arab-Israeli conflict, control over oil resources, Arab integration, high-technology transfers, and the spread of negative stereotypes concerning Arabs and the world of Islam?

Western governments are now accurately taking stock of the disastrous consequences that have flowed from their traditional policies of maintaining order in the Middle East by supporting inept and corrupt potentates. The West would like to see the situation evolve in the direction of greater middle-class political participation, less-arbitrary states, and more-professional administrations. Yet for such a new policy to become credible in the eyes of the Arab peoples, the Western powers must avoid presenting Arabs with the idea that increased individual liberties can form a substitute for sovereignty, justice, and equality in rights and dignity.

The Western countries will not succeed in this project of democratization, however, unless they redefine their vital interests in the region in such a way that Arab societies no longer see a continuation of the will to dominate and impose subjection, but rather the beginnings of a

true strategic cooperation for the health of a region whose fate is closely linked to that of Europe and the United States. Otherwise, Arab democracy will express itself through the emergence of more intensely anti-Western regimes that will represent a rejection of the profoundly neocolonial policies that have marked the attitude of the West toward the Middle East since World War II. In this case, it is to be feared that Western governments will go back on their promises once more, betraying the cause of democracy—just as after World War I they betrayed their promise to create a unified Arab realm that would preserve the unity and avoid the parceling out of the Middle East.

Lacking the power to resolve the basic problems that have provoked this crisis and delegitimized the Arab regimes—namely, the absence of sovereignty, the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the lack of regional cooperation, the cessation of economic and social development, and the feudalization of the state and public administration—Western governments will be obliged, in order to maintain the illusion of a promised yet impossible democratization, to have recourse to manipulation. They cannot create the illusion of pluralism and alternation in power while keeping power in the hands of muscle-bound local cadres who act as their feudal retainers or foreign tour guides without permanently working toward dividing the elites. This could resemble the type of political arrangement that prevailed under colonialism, in which guarantees underwriting the exercise of certain individual liberties went hand-in-hand with foreign occupation and domination. Such an arrangement could doubtless create, at least for a moment, a certain feeling of emancipation, since Arab citizens would no longer have to see the same powerholders eternally holding office. Yet in this case, the Middle East will not have democratic regimes, and still less a chance to succeed in achieving urgently needed political, social, cultural, and economic reforms. The crisis that stirs Arab societies today will be amplified, and among its consequences will be an increased risk of a general explosion provoked by pauperization and injustice, and by the lack of hopeful prospects and the ineluctable rise of joblessness.

The U.S.-led intervention in Iraq will quickly come to be seen as a major step on the road toward the reestablishment of the neocolonial order, confirmed and made worse by regional-policy choices and international-security strategies that are as irrational as they are counterproductive. Loudly announced Euro-American democratization projects will fade into oblivion, having served only to short-circuit the unfolding fight for an authentic democratic transformation begun by new elites who reject both local despotism and the strategies of neocolonialism, and who act in harmony with their peoples to integrate the Arab world into the universal material, political, and cultural circuits of civilization.