

Democracy deficit in the Muslim world

OP-ED



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DESPITE ENCOURAGING SIGNS, IT IS impossible to ignore a "democracy deficit" in the Muslim world, especially the Arab part of it. Only one of every four countries with Muslim majorities has a democratically elected government. Worse yet, the gap between Muslim countries and the rest of the world is widening.

Democracy and freedom expanded over recent decades into Latin America, Africa, Europe, and Asia, but the Muslim world continues to struggle. By the reckoning of Freedom House, a think-tank devoted to monitoring democracy worldwide, the number of "free" countries around the world increased by nearly three dozen over the past 20 years. Not one has a Muslim majority.

This phenomenon has been noted within the Muslim world as well. In the summer of 2002, a team of Arab scholars produced the *Arab Human Development Report*, written on behalf of the UN Development Program and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. It portrays an Arab world lagging behind other regions in key measures, including individual freedom and women's empowerment, as well as economic and social development.

Disturbing trends, such as a demographic youth "bulge" combined with high youth unemployment rates — reaching almost 40% in some places — highlight potentially explosive social conditions. The Arab world faces serious problems that can only be met by more flexible, democratic political systems.

The second *Arab Human Development Report*, issued in 2003, underscores the close relationship between the Arab world's educational shortcomings and its lack of democracy. Democracy requires an informed citizenry able to question its government. A well-educated citizenry is also essential if young men and women are to acquire the skills needed to perform the sort of jobs today's global and competitive world demands.

Alas, instead of progress, what we see is a

cycle of inadequate educational opportunity leading to a lack of economic opportunity. Neither freedom nor prosperity can develop in such conditions.

Muslims cannot blame the United States for their lack of democracy. Still, America does play a large role on the world stage; and in many parts of the Muslim world, particularly in the Arab world, successive US administrations — Republican and Democratic alike — have not made democratisation a priority.

At various times, the US avoided scrutinising the internal workings of friendly countries in the interest of ensuring a steady flow of oil; containing Soviet, Iraqi, and Iranian expansionism; addressing issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict; resisting communism in

East Asia; or securing military bases. By failing to foster gradual democratisation — and yielding to a "democratic exception" in parts of the Muslim world — America missed an opportunity to help these countries adapt to the stresses of a globalising world.

Continuing this policy is not in America's interest. According to the Bush administration's 2002 National Security Strategy, US policy will be more actively engaged in supporting democratic trends globally, with no exception for the Muslim world.

This commitment was made with the full knowledge that democracies are imperfect and terribly complicated. Leaders in some Muslim states contrast democratic systems with their more orderly arrangements and point with satisfaction to the seeming stability that alternatives to democracy provide. But stability based on authority alone is illusory and ultimately impossible to sustain. Iran, Romania, and Liberia illustrate that rigid authoritarian systems cannot withstand the shocks of social, political, or economic change, especially at the pace that characterises today's world.

Any doubt that promoting democracy now receives greater emphasis in US foreign policy was removed by President Bush's speech of last November, in which he made clear that the Muslim world's democratic deficit is not tied to religion, but to "failures of political and economic doctrines".

President Bush also made clear that Americans had learned from the past. "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe — because, in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export."

So the US now actively supports the extension of democracy throughout the Arab and

Muslim worlds, not simply for humanitarian reasons, or for theoretical reasons, but from self-interest. History shows that societies where opportunity is safeguarded tend to be societies that are good international citizens.

But, like medical doctors' Hippocratic oath, America and others must pledge to do no harm in promoting democracy. Unrestrained zeal to make the world better could make it worse. Promoting democracy must be undertaken with humility, care, and wisdom.

Many models of democracy exist; and some models cannot be exported. Moreover, mere elections should never be confused with democracy. Rather, what distinguishes democracy from other systems is a distribution of power both within government and within society. Until such a balance exists, elections can threaten freedom by concentrating too much authority in one person or body without providing adequate checks and balances, including independent media. Not surprisingly, this takes time, resources, and effort.

Finally, political reform must go hand in hand with economic and educational reform for all the citizens in a society, including the 50% who happen to be women. No country can succeed if it denies itself the talents of half of its people.

True, democracy can only be built and maintained from within, by a country's people and leaders. Outsiders, however, can and should help. There is a role for governments, international organisations, corporations, universities, and journalists — from the US, but also from Europe and countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa where democracy has taken root. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a more important task for established democracies than helping other countries join their ranks. —DT-PS

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