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OPINION
LEADERS**The Arab world****Waking from its sleep**

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A quiet revolution has begun in the Arab world; it will be complete only when the last failed dictatorship is voted out

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WHAT ails the Arabs? The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) this week published the fifth in a series of hard-hitting reports on the state of the Arab world. It makes depressing reading. The Arabs are a dynamic and inventive people whose long and proud history includes fabulous contributions to art, culture, science and, of course, religion. The score of modern Arab states, on the other hand, have been impressive mainly for their consistent record of failure.

They have, for a start, failed to make their people free: six Arab countries have an outright ban on political parties and the rest restrict them slyly. They have failed to make their people rich: despite their oil, the UN reports that about two out of five people in the Arab world live on \$2 or less a day. They have failed to keep their people safe: the report argues that overpowerful internal security forces often turn the Arab state into a menace to its own people. And they are about to fail their young people. The UNDP reckons the Arab world must create 50m new jobs by 2020 to accommodate a growing, youthful workforce—virtually impossible on present trends.

Arab governments are used to shrugging off criticism. They had to endure a lot of it when George Bush was president and America's neoconservatives blamed the rise of al-Qaeda on the lack of Arab democracy. Long practice has made Arab rulers expert at explaining their failings away. They point to their culture and say it is unsuited to Western forms of democracy. Or they point to their history, and say that in modern times they would have done much better had they not had to deal with the intrusions of imperialists, Zionists and cold warriors.

Some of this is undeniable. A case can indeed be made that Islam complicates democracy. And, yes, oil, Israel and the rivalry between America and the Soviet Union meant that the Arab world was not left to find its own way after the colonial period ended. More recently the Arabs have been buffeted by the invasion of Iraq. Now they find themselves caught in the middle as America and Iran jostle for regional dominance.

Strangely, your highness, they like voting

Still, as the decades roll by the excuses wear thin. Islam has not prevented democracy from taking root in the Muslim countries of Asia. Even after its recent flawed election, Iran, a supposed theocracy, shows greater democratic vitality than most Arab countries. As for outside intrusion, some of the more robust Arab elections of recent years have been held by Palestinians, under Israeli occupation, and by Iraqis after America's invasion. When they are given a chance to take part in genuine elections—as, lately, the Lebanese were—Arabs have no difficulty understanding what is at stake and they turn out to vote in large numbers. By and large it is their own leaders who have chosen to prevent, rig or disregard elections, for fear that if Arabs had a say most would vote to throw the rascals out.

For this reason, you can bet that if the regimes have their way, Arabs will not get the chance. Arab rulers hold on to power through a cynical combination of coercion, intimidation and co-option. From time to time they let hollow parties fight bogus elections, which then return them to power. Where genuine opposition exists it tends to be fatally split between Islamist movements on one hand and, on the other, secular parties that fear the Islamists more than they dislike the regimes themselves. Most of the small cosmetic reforms Arab leaders enacted when Mr Bush was pushing his "freedom agenda" on unwilling allies have since been rolled back. If anything, sad to say, the cause of democracy became tainted by association with a president most Arabs despised for invading Iraq.

The illusion of permanence

Can regimes that are failing their people so clearly really hold sway over some 350m people indefinitely? Hosni Mubarak has been Egypt's president for 28 years; Muammar Qaddafi has run Libya since 1969. When Hafez Assad died after three decades as president of Syria, power passed smoothly to his son Bashar. After the failure of Mr Bush's efforts to promote democracy, and the debacle in Iraq, Barack Obama has put "respect" rather than "freedom" at the centre of America's discourse with the Muslim world. That may be wise: since the advent of Mr Obama, America's standing has risen in Arab eyes, and Mr Bush's zeal for reforming other countries was counterproductive anyway. But this suggests that if the Arabs want democracy, they will have to grab it for themselves.

Some in the West are wary of Arab elections, fearing that Islamists would exploit the chance to seize power on the principle of "one man, one vote, one time". Yet Islamists seem to struggle to raise their support much above 20% of the electorate. Non-Arab Muslim countries like Turkey and Indonesia suggest that democracy is the best way to draw the poison of extremism. Repression only makes it more dangerous.

Democracy is more than just elections. It is about education, tolerance and building independent institutions such as a judiciary and a free press. The hard question is how much ordinary Arabs want all this. There have been precious few Tehran-style protests on the streets of Cairo. Most Arabs still seem unwilling to pay the price of change. Or perhaps, observing Iraq, they prefer stagnation to the chaos that change might bring. But regimes would be unwise to count on permanent passivity. As our [special report](#) in this issue argues, behind the political stagnation of the Arab world a great social upheaval is under way, with far-reaching consequences.

In almost every Arab country, fertility is in decline, more people, especially women, are becoming educated, and businessmen want a bigger say in economies dominated by the state. Above all, a revolution in satellite television has broken the spell of the state-run media and created a public that wants the rulers to explain and justify themselves as never before. On their own, none of these changes seems big enough to prompt a revolution. But taken together they are creating a great agitation under the surface. The old pattern of Arab government—corrupt, opaque and authoritarian—has failed on every level and does not deserve to survive. At some point it will almost certainly collapse. The great unknown is when.

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