

How to stay in charge

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Not just coercion, sham democracy too

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The gentler side of Kuwaiti politics

A LOT of the wounding comparative statistics trotted out to demonstrate the backwardness of the Arabs appeared first in the Arab Human Development Report of 2002. Its stark findings influenced the design of the Bush administration's Middle East Partnership Initiative. In the Arab world itself the report owed its resonance to the fact that it was written not by Western technocrats but by a team of Arab academics. The lead author was Nader Fergany, encountered earlier in this report berating the Americans as "the new Mongols" of the Middle East.

Now director of the Almishkat Centre for Research and Training in Cairo, Mr Fergany is no less furious with the Arab regimes, which he accuses of doing everything in their power to obstruct democracy and social justice. In most Arab countries, he says, the political order is oppressive and democracy a sham, a hollow system incapable of accommodating the vitality of the people. Egypt's ruling party (no, he corrects himself, "the party of the ruler") has no popular support and "the so-called legitimate opposition parties are essentially dead corpses."

Though the local details vary, most Arab regimes maintain their power in remarkably similar ways. At the apex of the system sits either a single authoritarian ruler, be he a monarch or a president, or an ever-ruling party or royal family. The ruler is shored up by an extensive *mukhabarat* (intelligence service) employing a vast network of informers. One retired Egyptian diplomat, speaking unattributably, puts the size of his own country's internal-security apparatus at about 2m people.

A second instrument of control is the government bureaucracy. With no rotation of power, Arab countries have blurred the distinction between ruler and state. Bloated civil services, says Brookings's Mr Pollack, provide the regimes with a way to dispense patronage and pretend-jobs to mop up new graduates. The size of these administrative behemoths is staggering. In 2007, he reckons, Egypt's civil service was about 7m strong, and as a proportion of their population the Gulf oil producers' public-sector payroll is higher still.

Elections galore, signifying nothing

And yet, strange to say, one of the regimes' most effective instruments of control is the elaborate system of democracy—sham democracy, that is—they have devised in order to channel and contain political dissent. Most Arab countries have parliaments and hold formal elections. In recent years national constitutions have been earnestly revised, and then revised again. The catch is that the parliaments have few powers and the elections are rigged to ensure that the ruler or his party cannot be unseated.

The few half-exceptions merely prove the rule. In May Kuwait made headlines when for the first time four women were elected to parliament, a genuinely rambunctious institution. But Kuwait's politics limp from crisis to crisis because the ever-ruling al-Sabah family refuses to let parliament hold its senior members, such as the prime minister, to account. When it threatens to, the emir dissolves parliament or the government resigns.

In Lebanon the election last month was an unrigged, hard-fought affair. But since Lebanon is a system of confessional baronies, no government wins full control of it through the ballot box. The strongest military force in Lebanon is not the national army but the militia run by Hizbullah, which is part of the opposition. So the convincing victory won by the pro-Western coalition led by Saad Hariri will not stop Hizbullah from controlling large parts of the country and having a big say in policy towards Israel.

That said, Mr Fergany does the opposition parties of the Arab world an injustice when he calls them "corpses". The Muslim Brotherhood is a powerful force in Egypt, even if it is not allowed to contest elections openly. Arabs who take part in opposition politics have few illusions about their ability ever to win power but hope that they can influence debate on the margins. Mahmoud Abaza, the leader of Egypt's venerable liberal party, the Wafd, says that neither his organisation nor the ruling National Democratic Party has any impact on legislation: laws are written by technicians and the job of the parliament is to provide a rubber-stamp. But he is proud of the role his party newspaper has played in provoking debate about political reform.

Besides, there are Arab countries with livelier parties than Egypt's. The Party for Justice and Development (PJD) in Morocco is a sophisticated movement with a large following and an aspiration to emulate the AK, the moderately Islamist party that has been so successful in Turkey. Indeed, Morocco has a long tradition of multi-party politics in which both secular and religious parties (though some of the latter are banned) have been allowed to flourish. In Algeria, too, a rich array of serious-minded parties is allowed to compete for parliamentary seats.

Permission to be a contender, however, should not be confused with an opportunity to win, and still less to govern. For all Morocco's long tradition of multi-party politics, it is the instincts of the king and the machinations of his palace that ultimately determine national policy. And in Algeria's election earlier this year the fact that five candidates ran against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika did not stop him from winning a third term with an entirely implausible 90% of the vote.

Let's all join together and fear Islam

If you are an autocrat but want to run a system of sham democracy, it is a boon if the opposition is divided. And so, in the Arab world, it is. Islamist parties stand on one side of the divide and secular ones on the other. In theory, your hold on power would be weaker if there were a danger of the secular and religious opposition joining forces. But so far they have not, and for a probably insurmountable reason: the secular parties fear the Islamists more than they dislike the present regimes.

By comparison with the regimes and the Islamist movements, the secular opposition parties are at a particular disadvantage. Their awful dilemma is dissected in a forthcoming book ("Getting to Pluralism", Carnegie Middle East Centre) by Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway. The regimes, the authors point out, can offer their

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Assad moves at his own pace

supporters the patronage of the state. The Islamists can offer their charity and social services through the mosques. The secular parties have no such favours to dole out. Nor, in truth, do they have much ideological fire in their bellies. The causes that propelled them in the glory days are either redundant (independence from colonial masters) or discredited (the pan-Arabism of Gamal Abdul Nasser or the Baathism of Syria and Iraq).

Moreover, given a choice between the status quo and the uncertain future promised by the Islamists, the instinct of such parties is to stick to the devils they know, however much it costs them at the polls. The 2005 election that delivered 20% of seats in Egypt's parliament to the Muslim Brotherhood gave a mere 5% to the four secular opposition parties.

Still, if the secular opposition parties are weak, their Islamist rivals are not necessarily as lusty as they seem. In the 1970s, says Mr Hamzawy, they built up a "mighty machinery" of social services, providing the needy with the practical help the regimes seemed unable to deliver. More recently Islamist parties have found themselves on the right side of the religious revival sweeping the Arab world. Even so, the going is becoming harder. Arabs are not becoming less pious, but the pious are beginning to question the point of participating in politics.

One reason for this is simple exhaustion. Exclusion from power begins to sap the motivation of even the most ardent of parties. In countries such as Morocco, where the Islamists are permitted to compete but never to win, voters are losing faith in the ability of the PJD to deliver even the mild reforms it proposes, such as more transparent and accountable government. In most Arab elections turnout is falling. And in Egypt and Jordan the Muslim Brotherhood has had to endure unpredictable cycles of repression and inclusion as the fears and whims of the regimes change. Jordan's King Abdullah has sometimes let Brotherhood members sit in cabinet and at other times moved against them, occasionally by squashing the vital social and charitable activities on which much of their popularity rests.

Another problem for the Islamists is that they, too, are prey to troubling ideological doubts. The PJD has debated endlessly what the "Islamist" label should mean. In meetings with Western journalists its leaders sometimes disavow it altogether and describe themselves as mildly pious social or liberal democrats. For some time now the Brotherhood in Egypt has been split over whether to stick to the simple, familiar slogan that has served them so well, that "Islam is the solution", or to elaborate a more detailed political programme, containing potentially divisive policies on economic management, women's rights and the rights of Egypt's large Coptic Christian minority. The mildly Islamist ruling AK party in Turkey is seen by the PJD as a model to emulate but accused by the Brotherhood of selling out.

Beyond these ideological perplexities the Islamists are hampered because, for all their popularity compared with both the regimes and the secular opposition parties, their popular support in the Arab world has a ceiling. On the basis of recent election results, Mr Hamzawy puts this at about 20% of the electorate, with some evidence from polls in Jordan and Morocco of a downward trend. In order to secure a majority, he argues, the Islamists need to form alliances with secular movements. But they are deterred from doing so by a mixture of arrogance and fear of diluting their simple message of adherence to the faith. With the Islamists disdaining the secular opposition and the secular parties afraid of the Islamists, the opposition in many Arab countries has checkmated itself.

From generation to generation

If opposition politics are stymied, what about change from within the regimes themselves? One hope has been that the grip of authoritarian rulers would relax as power passed down the generations, bringing to the fore a new brand of leaders with a more modern outlook. In some cases it has. Morocco's King Muhammad is more of a moderniser than was his father, King Hassan. Saudi Arabia's Abdullah, who eventually ascended the throne in 2005 at the tender age of 80, has cautiously accelerated the careful reforms he initiated during his time as crown prince when his even older half-brother Fahd was king. Earlier this year an administrative reshuffle caused a flutter when Nora al-Fayez was appointed as a deputy minister, the highest government job ever to have been filled by a woman.

In other cases, however, the passing of the torch to a new generation has brought mainly disappointment. Jordan has not become conspicuously more liberal under King Abdullah than it was under King Hussein. When Bashar Assad, educated as an ophthalmologist in London and married to a Syrian born and raised in Britain, assumed

power in 2000 after the long reign of his ruthless father Hafez, he was greeted by some in the West as an internet-savvy liberal reformer, promising a breath of fresh air. But an all-too-brief "Damascus spring" did not last long.

At the beginning of 2001 more than 1,000 Syrian activists signed a declaration calling for political reform and an end to the state of emergency that has been in effect since 1963, ostensibly because of the conflict with Israel. The new president's reaction was to take fright and have many of the most prominent signatories arrested. In 2005 a few brave souls renewed their demands in a "Damascus Declaration". This led to another crackdown.

In March this year President Assad did at last hint that a cautious economic liberalisation now under way in Syria might be accompanied by political changes, such as the creation of an upper house that would give a bigger voice to the opposition. But all that, he added, would come about "gradually, at our own pace". Will change at the leaders' pace be fast enough?

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