

The fever under the surface

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A silent social revolution

AFP



Inculcating the habit of protest

PRESIDENT ASSAD'S decision to nip the reform movement in the bud in 2005 should not have surprised Syria's would-be democrats, for this was a moment of extreme danger to the regime. Influential voices in Washington, DC, were urging Mr Bush to finish what he had started in Iraq by toppling Syria's leadership too. And in neighbouring Lebanon, which Syria had long treated as a vassal, the assassination of Rafik Hariri, a popular former prime minister, had triggered massive protests. Many Lebanese blamed Syria for Mr Hariri's murder. Their spontaneous protests—one of the biggest manifestations of "people's power" the Arab world had witnessed—came to be known as the "cedar revolution". Within months (and with the prodding of France and America) the cedar revolution forced Mr Assad to withdraw his army from Lebanon, after a stay of 30 years.

The sort of people's power on display in Lebanon in 2005 has not yet expressed itself on a similar scale anywhere else in the Arab world. All the same the habit of protest is gaining ground. Three years ago, in a stand-off between the government and parliament over an electoral law, student demonstrators in Kuwait camped out in front of the parliament. In the Sinai peninsula, Bedouin tribesmen demanding property rights from the Egyptian government have staged embarrassing sit-ins on the border with Israel. And on April 6th 2008 a strike by textile workers in a city north of Cairo was joined by young activists and billowed into a cloud of protests that spread across Egypt.

Despairing of the possibility of change from above, says Mr Fergany, Egyptians from every social class except the plutocratic clique at the heart of the regime are taking their political and economic demands to their streets and workplaces. "Hardly a day passes without scores if not hundreds of protests in different areas of the country," he claims.

A spirit of Arab protest is also alive in the blogosphere. Like young Iranians, young Arabs are tuning into social-networking sites such as Facebook, posting videos on YouTube and writing blogs, some of them with overtly political themes. When Saudi Arabia sent a men-only team to the Beijing Olympics last year Saudi women staged a protest and posted images of it on the internet. To mark women's day in 2008, a courageous Saudi activist, Wajeha al-Huwaider, used YouTube to post a video of herself breaking the law by driving a car. Wael Abbas, an Egyptian blogger, has used his site to publish video footage showing the police beating up protesters, torturing detainees and rigging vote counts. Egypt's April 6th movement started life as a Facebook page. Mr Abaza of Egypt's Wafd party says that the Islamists already had their network of mosques but that the web is now giving young liberals a network too.

Still, these are slender straws from which to construct a claim that the Arab world is in a "pre-revolutionary" condition. "There is something taking place, it's new, it's interesting—but from there to see revolution? No." So says one Cairo-based social scientist, requesting anonymity.

The lot of young people in the Arab world may be difficult, but their woes should not be exaggerated. In global surveys young Arabs turn out to be relatively optimistic about the future. The frustrations they experience as they turn into adults—notably the years of "waithood" that are typical before they find jobs and, therefore, before they can marry and enjoy sex (premarital relations are taboo in much of the Arab world)—are hardly the stuff of which political revolutions are generally made. Though some young people may look to politics to redress their grievances, the response of many is merely to retreat into the private sphere.

Moreover, such protests as have taken place have been easy to snuff out. When the Egyptian movement inspired by the April 6th 2008 protests tried to organise a follow-up "day of anger" on the same date this year, the effort fizzled. Pre-emptive arrests and a massive police presence kept would-be demonstrators at home.

As for the blogosphere, internet penetration in the Arab world is low by global standards (and compared with Iran), and bloggers are all too easy to identify and intimidate. In April an Egyptian blogger, Ahmed Mohsen, was detained on the Orwellian charge of "exploiting the democratic climate to overthrow the government".

The last popular revolution in the Middle East took place in 1979 in Iran, after liberal, left and Islamist forces combined to overthrow the shah, a man who had tried recklessly to force his own version of secular modernity on a complex, traditional and devout society. Last month's Iranian election caused a new eruption of popular protest in Tehran. Nowhere in the Arab world, where the system of state control tends to be more subtle and the regimes' opponents are divided, looks ripe for an upheaval of this sort.

Green shoots of change

However, political revolution is one thing, social revolution another. If the prospect of the first looks far-fetched, the second is already in train in every Arab society. Fertility is in decline. More people, especially women, are becoming educated. A young labour force has new aspirations. Arabs know far more than they ever used to about the world and about each other, thanks to a transformation in the region's media spearheaded by satellite television. Private investors and entrepreneurs are playing a growing role in economies that used to be dominated by the state. Taken together, all this has produced what Ahmed Galal, a distinguished economist and managing director of the Cairo-based Economic Research Forum, calls "a fever under the surface".

Though none may be a game-changer on its own, all these influences have political consequences of some kind. For example, Abdel Monem Said Aly, director of the Al Ahram Centre in Cairo, believes that the growing economic role of the private sector is changing the way Egypt is governed. For the first time in decades, he says, the private sector employs more people and invests more in the economy than the government does. This is creating greater transparency: the government budget is nowadays submitted for debate to the Shura Council (parliament's upper house), not just handed down from on high. Business associations and chambers of commerce are increasingly involved in public policy in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait. And an unprecedented number of businessmen now sit in Arab parliaments. In Egypt's (with 454 elected seats, including ten presidential appointees) the number grew from 37 in the five-year term starting in 1995 to 68 in the term starting in 2005.

Since the parliaments the businessmen are joining are pretty toothless affairs, it would be wrong to make extravagant claims for changes like this. Businesspeople do not enter politics in order to antagonise the governments on whose patronage, permissions, licences and other favours they depend. "No politics—that is my golden rule," was the telling opening remark of one businessman interviewed for this special report. Even the few who do speak out on politics tend to emphasise the need for "modernisation": of procedures, regulations, education and training. That is hardly the same thing as political reform. Nonetheless, the expanding role of business means that the circle of consultation and decision-making has grown beyond the coterie that used to call the shots.

Eyevine



The power of al-Jazeera

A far greater change over the past two decades is that Arabs today enjoy unprecedented access to information and, especially, debate. Even as late as the early 1990s, watching television in the Arab world was a dispiriting business. What passed for coverage of news and current affairs was solemn footage of presidents and emirs receiving visitors and cutting ribbons at official events.

All this changed utterly after 1996 when the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, established the al-Jazeera television station in his capital, Doha. In return for choosing not to dwell overmuch on the blemishes of Qatar itself, the new station was allowed to broadcast proper, hard-hitting news from everywhere else in the Arab world. With a staff of zealous journalists, many of them Palestinians, it went on to do so with gusto and quickly spawned many imitators and competitors.

Cognitive anarchy

After 1996, says Wadah Khanfar, al-Jazeera's (Palestinian) director-general, "everything exploded"; the Arab world entered a period of "cognitive anarchy". The consequence of it all, in the view of Marc Lynch, an academic at George Washington University in Washington, DC, has been the birth of "a new Arab public". After the al-Jazeera phenomenon, he thinks, Arabs will no longer put up with the old tradition of enforced public consensus. They are making their leaders explain and justify themselves as never before. And although it is no substitute for a proper electoral democracy, this is building the underpinnings of a new kind of pluralist politics "rooted in a vocal, critical public sphere".

Its many critics would be surprised to hear that al-Jazeera was a force for progress. The station's screening of the hate videos Osama bin Laden smuggles out of hiding is controversial. So—in the West—is the vehemence of its support for the Palestinian cause. During Israel's Gaza war this year al-Jazeera broadcast the sort of unedited footage that most stations deem too gruesome to air. Even in times of relative calm its Arabic-language coverage (the English channel is milder) of the conflict is relentless and partisan. Unlike al-Arabiya, its Saudi-sponsored rival, it makes little effort to cover Palestine in a manner a Western audience would consider balanced. To some degree Mr Khanfar acknowledges this. His journalists are professional, he insists, but there is a limit to how far the station can offend "the strongest collective feelings" of the Arab world.

Then again, Palestine is the uniting and almost sacred cause of the Arab world. If you judge al-Jazeera by the rest of its coverage, a different picture emerges. In 2006 Mr Lynch published a study of the station's reporting of Iraq since the late 1990s ("Voices of the New Arab Public", Columbia). Like Palestine, Iraq is a story that has gripped and preoccupied Arabs everywhere. But on this one they have not formed a single view. His conclusion is that al-Jazeera reflected all sides of the bitter arguments that divided Arabs over issues such as the behaviour of Saddam, the Western sanctions, the American invasion and the legitimacy—or not—of the Iraqi government that followed. Both al-Jazeera and its rivals provided detailed and enthusiastic coverage of the Iraqi elections of 2005, despite the conviction of many Arabs outside the country that a vote held under American occupation had to be bogus.

Moreover, this open-minded approach to reporting and analysis did not apply only to Iraq and its vicissitudes. From 2003 onwards al-Jazeera's reporters and talk-show hosts put themselves at the heart of the American-initiated debate about political reform in the Arab world.

The station looked closely at the G8's American-inspired Greater Middle East Initiative, giving airtime to American as well as Arab talking heads. In one online al-Jazeera poll in 2003, 84% of viewers said that Arab governments were neither sincere about reform nor capable of bringing it about. When President Bush said he had been inspired by reading a book on democracy by Natan Sharansky, an Israeli politician (and former Soviet dissident), al-Jazeera interviewed the author and asked him how his book might apply to the Arab world. It did this even though many Arabs, reformers included, remain deeply shocked by al-Jazeera's now well-established practice of letting Israelis appear on its shows.

Where broadcasting has led, the printed press has followed. The meek official newspapers that used to have the field to themselves are facing new and more outspoken private competitors. Even the most authoritarian regimes accept that it is no longer possible to suppress all information and stifle every criticism. Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch, a monitoring group based in New York, returned from a recent visit to Libya reporting the stirrings of a new *glasnost*. Although the regime remains firmly in control, new newspapers were being allowed to nibble away at sensitive subjects, with one carrying pages of editorials exposing bureaucratic misconduct and corruption.

Naturally, such freedoms have their carefully circumscribed limits. Al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya are careful not to antagonise their respective Qatari and Saudi sponsors. They are vulnerable to high Arab politics: al-Jazeera has recently been muting its criticism of Saudi Arabia, probably at the behest of the Qatari royal family. Moreover, there is always a danger that freedoms extended at the whim of a ruler can be withdrawn.

The Syrian Media Centre, a private monitoring organisation, told Reuters in May that the Syrian

authorities blocked 225 internet sites in 2008, up from 159 in 2007. They included several Arab newspapers and portals, Amazon, Facebook and YouTube. In April Human Rights Watch noted that a new media law pending in the United Arab Emirates would tighten restrictions on media freedom. And the editor of a Qatari newspaper, speaking privately, told *The Economist* that laws were anyway not the main impediment to press freedom in his country. What checked his pen was the certainty of social exclusion if he offended the establishment.

Another change with implications for politics is that the new Arab public now tuning into stations like al-Jazeera is better educated than ever before. Over the past five years, reckons Vincent Romani in a paper for the Crown Centre for Middle East Studies at America's Brandeis University, the GCC countries have spent at least \$50 billion on higher education in an effort to buy these traditional societies a place in the global knowledge economy. Qatar has attracted half a dozen American and two Australian universities to its Education City in Doha; Dubai's International Academic City houses branches of 32 foreign universities; and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah University of Science and Technology is due to open later this year with a personal royal endowment of \$10 billion.

These are huge investments, even if their concentration in one rich corner of the Arab world will limit their impact. Citadel Capital's Ahmed Heikal says that such efforts need to be replicated throughout the region. "In an area of our size we cannot have a single centre for excellence in education," he says. So far, however, higher education in the Arab world at large has produced few critical minds. Most Arab universities are victims of "massification": Egypt shoves 30% of the relevant age group into university, of whom fewer than half graduate. Outside the private sector standards are abysmal.

Liberals and conservatives

If the "fever under the surface" does eventually transform Arab politics and society, what direction will the change take? It is a mistake to assume that trends such as greater media freedom push invariably in a liberal direction. On the contrary, Arab conservatives have a record of exploiting new communications technology at least as well as liberals, and often better.

Well before the advent of the internet, radical imams made brilliant use of videocassettes to spread their teachings, drowning out the sermons of milder clerics. The Muslim Brothers, especially the younger ones, are active bloggers. And the messages being pumped into the airwaves by satellite television stations are by no means all congenial to the West. The new media have created a vast audience for Shia firebrands like Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hizbullah, and Sunni radicals like Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, a Qatar-based preacher who may not be a jihadist but is no liberal either. In some Arab countries, indeed, democracy and liberalism push in opposite directions. There are places where the lot of women has deteriorated precisely because the regimes have felt the need to pay more heed to the social conservatism of the Islamist opposition.

Another mistake is to exaggerate the degree to which Arabs want to participate in politics at all. For the most part this remains a minority sport. Some of the most significant trends among Arabs are therefore not captured by political analysis. And those who stay silently out of politics are not all secular liberals waiting for times to change. A growing pattern is for Arabs with strong and even extreme religious ideals to eschew long-established political movements, such as the Brotherhood, and devote themselves to personal lives of extreme piety, a phenomenon that has come to be labelled "apolitical" or sometimes "scientific" Salafism.

Arabian Eye



A place in the knowledge economy

The Salafist movement champions a return to the pure Islamic traditions practised by Muhammad and his

contemporaries at the time of Islam's birth (the al-Salaf al-Salih are "the pious forefathers"). Like al-Qaeda, the apolitical Salafists adhere to a Utopian vision of Islam mastering the world. But they do not pursue *jihad* against the West and refrain from attacking the prerogatives or legitimacy of the Arab regimes. They do not form political organisations, yet they are organised: when last year hundreds of people were buried under a rock slide in Cairo, commentators observed that Salafist groups were quicker than the Brotherhood to help the smitten.

Politics by stealth

Because they do not usually criticise the regimes, the apolitical Salafists are tolerated by the security services and so enjoy an advantage in spreading their message. They also have ample funds. Although the Saudi government denies giving active support to such groups, much of their inspiration, as well as generous amounts of private—and princely—money, seems to come from Saudi Arabia. Egyptians remark that a lot of their countrymen who spend a few years working in Saudi Arabia return home as devout Salafists.

Personal religious choices such as these are not directly political, but the sum of these choices influences the trajectory of the Arab world. Extreme social conservatives, obsessed with ritual, purity and often sex, the Salafists are unfriendly to liberal causes such as female emancipation. Moreover, there is reason to wonder how long their present quietism will last. Issandr el Amrani, an independent analyst, calls them "incipiently *takfiri*". Like al-Qaeda, in other words, they tend to regard those Muslims whose practice of the faith falls short of their own exacting standards as *takfir*—unbelievers or even apostates. Experience suggests that this sort of intolerance can all too easily give rise to political violence.

In the eyes of the regimes, Islam itself is a potential danger, because it is a source of authority and wellspring of action which the media revolution has put beyond the control of governments. Religious fervour is growing among Arabs at a time when venerable religious institutions with the imprimatur of governments, such as Al-Azhar in Cairo, are no longer able to lay down doctrinal law and command automatic obedience. Access to the airwaves and the internet has democratised Islam, forcing rival interpreters of the faith to compete on their own merits for an audience that crosses sects and borders. And this cacophony inside Islam is itself part of a wider, and surprising, paradox of today's Arab world, which is that, behind the stagnation of its formal politics, it is engaged in a fierce and potentially history-altering battle of ideas.

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