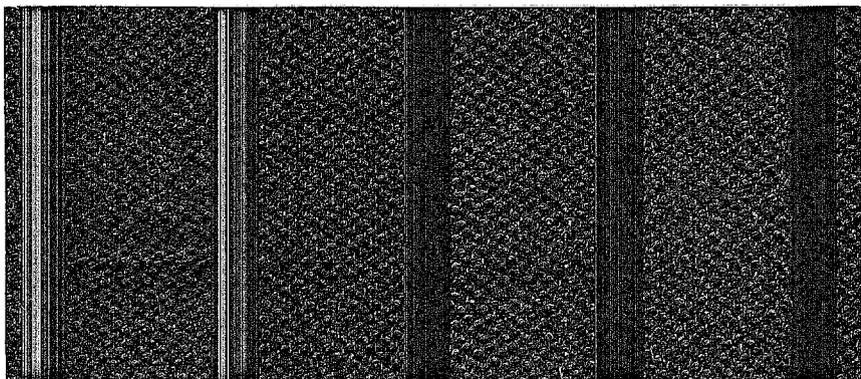


DEMOCRATIZATION



DEMOCRATIZATION
IN THE MIDDLE EAST
Trends and Prospects

Summary of a Workshop

Sabri Sayari, editor

Panel on Issues in Democratization
Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education
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DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: TRENDS AND PROSPECTS

INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy has been the exception rather than the rule in the contemporary Middle East. The principal exceptions in varying degrees have been Israel, Turkey, and—until the breakdown of its state institutions through civil strife—Lebanon. Post-independence politics in the Arab world has been characterized by varieties of authoritarianism and personalized rule. Often dominated by a strongman, authoritarian Arab regimes have opposed the introduction of fundamental democratic practices, such as regularly held free elections with multiple political parties, accountability of the rulers to the ruled, freedom of speech and association, and respect for individual human rights. Some of the hard-line Arab regimes such as Iraq and Syria have long practiced political repression through both sophisticated technologies of control and brutal use of physical force to eliminate their real or imaginary opponents.

In more recent years, however, some authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have experienced significant political openings by implementing limited political reforms that provide for competitive elections, multiplicity of political parties, freedom of the press, and greater respect for human rights. These gradual and controlled political openings possibly represent a significant new trend in many parts of the region. However, the movement toward political liberalization in the Middle East has not progressed in a uniform and unilinear fashion: some of the hard-line authoritarian regimes such as Iraq, Syria, and Libya continue to oppose the introduction of democratic reforms and political freedoms. In others, such as Algeria, an abrupt transition to democracy has been followed by an equally abrupt reversal to authoritarian rule by military intervention, following the victory of Islamic fundamentalists in the first elections permitted by the country's incumbent leadership.

To assess the current trends concerning democratic reforms in the Middle East, the National Intelligence Council asked the National Academy of Sciences, through its Panel on Issues in Democratization of the National Research Council, to organize a workshop to discuss the future of democratization efforts in the Middle East. The participants in the meeting, held in November 1992, included academic specialists from the United States and the Arab world, representatives of U.S. government agencies, members of the Middle East policy community in Washington, and individuals affiliated with private organizations involved in democratization efforts.

The focus of many recent policy discussions in Washington regarding democratization in the Middle East has been the relationship between Islam and democracy. Questions on this issue range from the compatibility of Islam and democracy to whether promoting democratic values and processes in the Middle East contributes to the rise to power of militant Islamists. The issue of democratization in the Middle East has also become a major topic of discussion in recent scholarly meetings and the object of a growing number of research projects. Many of these have tended to have a specific focus, such as the strengthening of civil society in the Middle East—intermediary organizations between the individual and the governing institutions of the state—or testing international relations theories that posit a positive causal relationship between the establishment of democracies and a reduction in wars and interstate conflicts.

The focus of the November workshop, "Democratization in the Middle East: Trends and Prospects," was more general and eclectic. No attempt was made to test a single hypothesis or

discuss only one particular approach. The main objective of the meeting was to examine political reforms in the Middle East from different perspectives and within a comparative framework. The speakers were asked to discuss political liberalization from a number of different perspectives, such as the impact of popular pressures, responses by governments, and their relation to economic reforms and structural adjustment programs. In the preparations for the meeting, no assumptions were made as to whether liberal democracy was possible, desirable, or inevitable in the Middle East.

The workshop participants were asked to address such key questions as: Is liberal democracy on the rise in the Middle East? Do the political reforms that have been implemented in recent years exemplify a trend toward the dissolution of authoritarian regimes and their replacement by some form of democratic government? Is the worldwide movement toward democratization a major force in the Middle East today? What are the major obstacles to political reforms? Where is there greatest potential for their implementation in the 1990s? This report summarizes the principal points raised by the participants and the main conclusions that emerged from the meeting.

DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Political Liberalization and Democratization

Whether the emergence of relatively free representative political processes and institutions in some parts of the region constitutes significant progress toward democracy was an underlying theme of most of the discussions during the workshop. Most participants supported the view that the Arab world is not an exception to the global wave of democratization and that the political reforms introduced in the region mark an important change in the political environment of the Middle East. Recent democratic openings have led to the breaking of political taboos through satire, theatre, and the media in a number of Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. There has been a discernible though gradual movement toward breaking away from the rigid authoritarianism of the past. This view was challenged by one participant, who contended that the region has not experienced a significant thrust toward democracy, that authoritarian regimes such as Iraq and Syria have survived major challenges, and that the liberalizing measures initiated by Arab regimes do not represent major changes.

There was clear agreement among the workshop participants about the need to distinguish political liberalization from democratization when assessing the current political changes in the region. The difference between liberalization and democratization has been emphasized in recent scholarly literature on the transition to democracy (e.g., O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). The transition to democracy is often preceded by a period of liberalization; however, it is also possible to have political liberalization without democratization. Political liberalization marks the beginning of the transition process and involves the easing of arbitrary controls and restrictions on the extension of political rights and guarantees to individuals and groups, if seldom extending to full freedom of speech, habeas corpus, removal of censorship of the press, and freedom to form political parties and associations that can oppose the government's policies. An important feature of liberalization in regimes undergoing change is that it can precipitate both intended and unintended consequences, and the latter can have far-reaching ramifications. Democratization is characterized by further extension and

institutionalization of individual and collective rights. Some of the significant features of the democratization process include the removal of all restrictions on political competition and electoral arrangements, the replacement of arbitrary decision-making mechanisms with democratic rules and procedures, the submission of government authority to popular accountability, and the establishment of effective methods to protect individual freedoms and human rights.

Participants in the meeting agreed that political liberalization rather than democratization best characterizes the changes taking place in several Middle Eastern states. The nature and scope of the reforms associated with liberalization vary considerably. In some cases (e.g., Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco), democratic openings have led to the emergence of *politically semicompetitive* regimes, in which the governing party or leadership permits elections, multiplicity of parties, and some degree of political opposition without tolerating genuine democratic challenges or alternatives to its rule. In others (e.g., Kuwait), in which political reforms have taken place within more narrowly drawn limits, liberalization has not yet produced a significant change in the basic makeup of the political system. None of the reform-oriented regimes in the region has made the transition from liberalization to democratization. However, as one participant emphasized, we should not belittle liberalization, because it represents an important change in the political life of Middle Eastern countries. For example, liberalization in Jordan since the late 1980s has produced significant results in popular participation, freedom of association, and competitive politics.

A recurrent theme in the discussions was that liberalization in the Middle East may generate consequences that were not intended by the incumbent governments when they initially launched democratic reforms, and that incremental changes may in fact cause some realignment of forces that could lead to more profound institutional changes. It may be useful, therefore, to examine the preconditions of unintended consequences in order to have a better idea about the potential for democratic changes. Different preconditions—the structure of civil society or the nature of the economic crisis—may or may not produce similar unintended consequences. One participant pointed out that the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe offers a good example of how liberalization and its unintended consequences affect progress toward democracy. Many Eastern Europeans are now disillusioned about democratic rule, since they feel that the transition from authoritarianism has exacerbated their economic and social problems. The fact that there is no euphoria about democracy in the Middle East at present and that people have more realistic attitudes regarding the prospects for democratization may turn out to be an advantage for the region in the long run.

Sources of Political Liberalization

What are the principal sources of political liberalization in the Middle East? What is the role of popular pressures in challenging authoritarian governments? Is liberalization essentially a defensive tactic used by regimes that are under duress? How important is the relationship between economic and political change? The sources of political change and liberalization in the region was a major topic of discussion. The discussions covered a wide range of issues, including popular attitudes toward democracy, the impact of structural adjustment policies and economic reforms on authoritarian governments, and the role of different social forces in facilitating or impeding democratic reforms.

Most participants agreed that the process of change in the authoritarian regimes was more heavily influenced by the defensive strategies of incumbent elites than by a groundswell of

support for democracy among the people in the Arab world. A number of factors were identified as the principal reasons for the adoption of political reforms as a regime survival strategy. The most important of these is the weakening of the political legitimacy of Arab regimes. Political legitimacy is based on a regime's ability "to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for society" (Lipset, 1963: 64).

Political legitimacy has been a central problem in the post-independence politics of the Arab world (see Hudson, 1977). However, most participants agreed that the crisis of legitimacy in the Middle East has deepened in recent years. This is partly due to the decline of ideologies, such as Arab nationalism or socialism, that were used extensively by authoritarian governments in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to legitimize their rule. The crisis of legitimacy in the region is also due to the growing failure of the Arab states to meet the economic, psychopolitical, and cultural needs of their citizens. Most Arab states have faced increasing economic and financial difficulties during the last decade as a result of numerous problems ranging from inefficient and uncompetitive state-controlled economies to corruption and mismanagement in the use of domestic and external economic resources. The demographic trends in the region—a rapid increase in the number of young people, which has created a large *lumpenproletariat* in all major Arab cities—exacerbate social and economic problems and undermine the capability of governments to respond adequately to pressing public policy issues. Although the problem of legitimacy in the Arab world is largely a product of internal conditions, changes in world politics have also contributed to its intensification. The end of the Cold War and the end of superpower competition pose new threats to the legitimacy of the region's authoritarian regimes, since they can no longer count on the availability of external resources to meet their economic and financial needs.

According to most of the participants, the problem of political legitimacy has been one of the principal reasons for the adoption of political reforms in the Middle East. Some of the region's authoritarian leaders and regimes view controlled political liberalization and the creation of institutionalized channels through parliaments, elections, and parties as a means of overcoming the mounting crisis of legitimacy that they face. Their expectation is that some form of more or less representative institutions and processes will provide an outlet for the expression of popular grievances and discontent without endangering their dominant political role.

There was a general recognition by the workshop participants that the challenge posed by the Islamic fundamentalist movements constitutes another principal source of political liberalization in the Middle East. The Islamic forces have managed to capitalize on social and economic problems, particularly the grievances of the urban poor. They have also made significant advances in the institutions of civil society. For example, they now control several key professional associations in Egypt. There is also a convergence of the pro-reform middle-class elements and Islamic fundamentalists—both groups are demanding greater governmental accountability. By including the more moderate Islamic groups in the political process, the liberalizing Arab governments seek to isolate them from the militant Islamists and undermine the influence of the latter. The centrality of the Islamic revival to the future of the democratization efforts in the Middle East was disputed by one participant, who argued that the Islamists are not the principal—or even the most important—actors in the democratic openings in the region. According to this observer, there is need to avoid the "Islamist bias" in discussions of political liberalization and to focus on other social and political forces, such as secular parties, trade unions, woman's rights organizations, civil and professional associations, and human rights groups.

Relationship Between Economic and Political Change

The question of whether economic liberalization is a causal factor in political reforms was a contentious issue at the meeting. One participant maintained that Arab regimes have built up extensive linkages and coalitions with various social groups, such as peasants, the middle class, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals. The legitimacy of a regime depends on support from these groups. In the past, the principal social groups surrendered their claims to political participation in return for such economic benefits as employment, subsidized housing, and education. However, in the 1980s, especially because of the oil glut, Arab regimes had increasing difficulty in maintaining their share of this bargain, since their resources were running out. They have also been compelled to undertake economic reforms in accordance with structural adjustment programs. In return for popular acceptance of painful economic measures that create greater inflation and unemployment in the short term, they have offered their citizens a measure of political participation through elections with multiple parties. This new "democratic bargain" is best reflected in the case of Egypt, where the process of controlled political liberalization has been closely intertwined with economic reforms.

Another participant questioned the existence of a causal relationship between economic and political liberalization as well the notion of a democratic bargain. He argued that the two processes could be promoted individually or jointly and that the conventional wisdom regarding the linkage between economic and political liberalization was bolstered by the recent Eastern European experience: economic crisis in the socialist states led to the dissolution of authoritarian regimes and their replacement by some form of democracy, which, in turn, facilitated the adoption of market-oriented economic policies. Consequently, political liberalization and economic liberalization were viewed as reinforcing one another. However, this situation does not necessarily apply to the Middle East, where there has been a distinctive and notable lag between economic and political changes. In some parts of the region such as Syria, economic liberalization has outpaced political liberalization, and we have yet to see even some of the rudimentary political consequences that economic liberalization is expected to produce.

Moreover, according to this participant, the notion of a democratic bargain misrepresents the interrelationship between economic and political liberalization and overstates the extent to which authoritarian regimes are prepared to accept the need for political reforms when faced with economic crises. The authoritarian governments of the Middle East have used a number of nondemocratic strategies to implement economic reforms. One of these is *corporatist liberalization*, in which economic reforms take place as a process of coalition management involving a small number of institutional actors. This has been used in Egypt and, to a lesser extent, in Tunisia. Another is the *selective liberalization* strategy, in which economic reforms are implemented by establishing private bargains or pacts between the regime and a very limited set of specific groups or even individuals, as in the case of Syria and Iraq. Finally, there is *imposed liberalization*, whereby economic reform measures are adopted principally as a defensive reaction to pressure from international lending agencies. Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt all experienced this in the late 1980s.

In this view, these economic strategies are not politically neutral—they may involve political liberalization, particularly when international aid is made contingent on political reform. But unlike the tendencies suggested by the democratic bargain perspective, their intent is to isolate the processes of economic and political reforms from one another and not to engage in them interdependently. In this respect, the Syrian case is particularly revealing. The Assad regime has been intent on insulating itself from the political consequences of economic

liberalization. Its goal has been to mobilize some nonstate sectors of the economy to revive the process of capital accumulation and the acquisition of foreign exchange and to build resources needed for the survival of the regime. As a result, Assad chose selective and corporatist liberalization precisely to avoid the political risks associated with a full-scale economic opening. And he has worked hard to insulate politically the most important sectors from the full effects of the economic crisis. The lesson of the 1980s is that authoritarian regimes possess a large measure of flexibility in managing economic crisis, and that these strategies reinforce or at least sustain authoritarian rule rather than undermine it.

One participant suggested that, although authoritarian governments had the necessary resources to pursue flexible economic policies in the 1980s, the magnitude and intensity of the economic crisis they now face, along with the drying up of foreign aid, will limit the likelihood of employing a similar strategy in the 1990s. Whether democracy is the answer is debatable, but some form of government accountability is inevitable. It is true that authoritarian governments have promoted economic development in East Asia without democratization, but they had civil servants of high calibre and were relatively free of corruption. No authoritarian Arab regime is in a similar position and, without the institutional mechanisms that oversee the accountability of governments, such as independent parliaments, it will be very difficult for them to meet the economic and social challenges of this decade.

Another member of the group suggested that there is need to examine the conditions under which the survival strategies of authoritarian governments become sustainable. For example, in the 1980s, external aid from foreign governments and international financial institutions was a key factor in the sustainability of structural adjustment policies. This is less the case now as a result of the decrease in foreign aid available through bilateral or multilateral channels. Moreover, most Middle Eastern regimes lack autonomous political organizations, such as mass parties and interest groups, that can provide support for governments when they undertake economic reforms that adversely affect the living standards of the people. For example, there is no counterpart of Poland's Solidarity trade union organization. As a result, Middle Eastern governments will have a much more difficult time in initiating self-sustainable survival strategies.

Popular Attitudes Toward Democracy

What are the public attitudes toward democracy in the Arab world? How strong are the popular aspirations for democratization? As noted earlier, workshop participants took the view that political reforms are largely the product of the survival strategies of elites rather than broad-based popular aspirations. This view was substantiated by one participant, who discussed the nature of Arab public opinion regarding the issue of democracy with reference to findings from survey research. The reliable measurement of public opinion in the Middle East has been difficult due to political restrictions, lack of availability of regular surveys, and problems in sampling and methodological procedures. However, there is a small but growing body of systematic survey research data that provides significant insights into the views of the Arab public regarding political and social issues (see Pollock, 1992). For example, one recent survey conducted by a commercial polling firm in seven Middle Eastern countries—Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain—shows that, although democracy does not rank very high on the people's agenda, it has moved up in the rankings of issues considered to be important. The results of this poll also indicate that the majority of the respondents rank religious and economic issues as their principal concerns. Although the

importance attached to democracy seems to be on the increase, it comes in a distant third after these two issues.

The research findings also underscore an important difference in the attitudes of more educated and less educated people regarding the desirability of a democratic form of government. For people with little or no education, democracy is not a major issue; there is much more interest in questions related to religion. Democracy has much greater appeal to educated professionals; they attach more importance to it than the general public. At the same time, there is also enormous ambivalence in the attitudes of elites: they are torn between a desire for democracy and the recognition that democratization might strengthen the role and influence of Islamic activists. They are also worried that the efforts of the West, particularly the United States, to promote democracy and human rights in the region may lead to greater political instability in the Arab world.

Obstacles to Democratization

What are some of the main impediments to political reforms in the region? This question came up in a number of discussions during the meeting. Some participants emphasized cultural factors as the principal obstacles to democratization. For example, it was suggested that democracy is constrained by religious values that place more importance on consensus than competition. This does not mean that democracy cannot occur in the region. But when it begins to develop, it will probably be an Islamic version, with a heavy emphasis on consensus among the participants in the political process, rather than something resembling the Western liberal model, which puts a premium on political competition.

Another member of the group noted that nondemocratic value systems predominate in all the major social institutions of the Middle East, such as the family, the school system, and the media. Unless these values are modified, there will be little progress toward economic and political liberalization in the region. Education can play an important role in facilitating openness and tolerance for divergent views. The promotion of democracy cannot succeed unless there are open debates about critical issues, such as the abuse of human rights. At present, such debates exist only in insulated intellectual circles.

The workshop discussions of the obstacles to democracy in the region also focused on the strength and attitudes of the middle class. Several participants contended that, in the West, economic development has promoted a middle class that, in turn, has played a critical role in the strengthening of liberal democracy. Workshop participants had different assessments of the strength of the middle class and its role in the liberalization of the Middle East's authoritarian regimes. Some contended that a new middle class has steadily grown in size since the 1960s and has increasingly asserted itself in pushing for greater popular participation in politics. This view was challenged by one participant, who argued that the concept of the middle class should be defined not only with reference to income but also with reference to behavioral and attitudinal characteristics. For example, the middle class in the West has fought hard battles in support of democratic values, tolerance for opposing views, and governmental accountability. Whether or not the new middle class in the Arab world has displayed similar modes of action and behavior is debatable.

The fear of political instability resulting from democratic reforms may constitute another obstacle to liberal changes in the Arab world. A participant pointed out that Western regard for elections and political competition is not necessarily shared throughout the Middle East: there are places where elections are perceived as potential sources of revolutionary changes that

seriously threaten political stability and order. Furthermore, democratization is likely to change the balance of power among different ethnic and sectarian groups in several multiethnic states. For example, in Iraq it could mean the rise to power of the Shi'ites, who constitute a majority of the population but who live under a regime controlled by the Sunni minority. A similar scenario could be repeated in Syria or Bahrain, where minorities are in power. These religious and sectarian minorities know that democratic elections would sweep them out of power. There is also the possibility that democratization may lead to fragmentation in Arab countries with a multiplicity of ethnic and sectarian groups, such as Iraq. One of the basic prerequisites of democracy is the willingness of people with different ethnic or sectarian affiliations to live together within the same state. It would be impossible to progress toward democracy if democratization undermines the integrity of the state.

The impact of the growing political strength of Islamic fundamentalism on attitudes toward democracy also constitutes a problem for democratization in the Middle East. The educated middle class in countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Jordan sees the Islamists not merely as another political force in electoral competition but as a threat to their lifestyles. Even those groups that have been in opposition to the government in the past, such as ex-communists and leftists, now seem to prefer existing regimes to democratic forms of government, and they seek protection from the political leadership against a possible rise to power by Islamic fundamentalists. The recent developments in Algeria exacerbated the perceived threat of the Islamists among the educated middle class who, under other circumstances, might have fought for democracy. One participant stressed the perceptions of middle-class women as an important problem: the accommodation of Islam to a democratic framework will be difficult if many women feel threatened by the possible rise to power of the Islamic fundamentalist political parties.

REGIMES AND POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Patterns and Modes of Political Reforms

The responses of governments to pressures for reforms have varied considerably: some of them have initiated cosmetic or token reforms; others have taken them seriously and implemented significant liberalizing measures. There are also regimes that have not introduced any discernible political reforms. During the last few years, Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, and Kuwait have experienced varying degrees of democratic openings, yet no political liberalization has occurred in Iran, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, or Libya. Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria are among the Arab countries in which reform efforts have stalled and the current status of the democratic opening seems uncertain.

Participants agreed that, among the states that have experimented with political liberalization, the monarchies, in particular Jordan, have been more adept at introducing political reforms than others. In comparison, Egypt and Tunisia appear to have lost much of the momentum for political liberalization, despite an earlier start in this process than the traditional and constitutional monarchies. The ongoing democratic opening in Yemen was viewed by the participants as an important case that is likely to have ramifications throughout the region.

In addition to its scope, the pace of the process of political liberalization in the region displays significant differences from country to country. Some have introduced reforms gradually, within a well-conceived strategy of political change; others moved abruptly toward

the establishment of competitive elections and a multiplicity of political parties without extensive prior preparation. In this respect, Jordan and Algeria represent two extreme cases. Jordan's democratic reforms were introduced gradually and within a well-planned framework. The first free and fair election was held in November 1989, when the Islamists won about one-third of the seats in the parliament. This was followed by the cancellation of emergency laws, the drafting of a national charter that defines the nature of civil-military relations, the modification of laws governing freedom of the press, and release of political prisoners after the Gulf crisis. Hence, it took nearly four years to move from authoritarian rule to controlled political liberalization. At present, the king and the military hold the balance of power, but they allow all other groups to participate in the political process.

The relatively smooth process of political liberalization in Jordan contrasts sharply with the experience of Algeria, where the response of the regime to rising pressures was late, inadequate, and abrupt. The government stalled on reforms for many years and then introduced competitive elections—first at the municipal and provincial level in 1990, then for the national parliament in late 1991—without adequate preparation. In particular, it failed to adopt an electoral system that might have precluded the sudden victory of the Islamists. As a result, the Algerian democratic opening failed to achieve its intended objectives. The military's intervention to prevent the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) from coming to power increased the level of political instability and uncertainty in Algeria and undermined the prospects for liberalization and peaceful political change.

Several members of the group emphasized the demonstration effect of these different modes of political change. For example, daily broadcasts from Jordan and Yemen about open and free debates regarding important public policy issues have had an impact on Saudi society. At the same time, despite their limited scope and objectives, the Saudi reforms have had an effect on other Gulf states: Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates are trying to emulate Saudi Arabia. But there are also demonstration effects that may impede the impetus for reforms. In this respect, many participants emphasized the impact of the recent developments in Algeria on the region. Some of the reform-oriented governments are worried that they may end up like Algeria, with the Islamic parties capturing political power through the electoral process. Furthermore, the Algerian case has influenced the attitudes of the pro-reform middle-class elements toward democratization. Many fear that democratic reforms may facilitate the strengthening of political Islam. However, one participant disagreed with this view, arguing that it is an example of a lack of political reforms and that it should not scare people about the consequences of liberalization. Furthermore, the lessons of Algeria have not been lost on other Islamist parties in the region that operate within the context of more or less representative processes and institutions. For example, in Jordan the Islamists have moderated their political strategies to avoid a possible move against them by the state.

What would be the best formula for political liberalization in the region? One suggestion was that the power-sharing model offers the best prospects for orderly and nonviolent change. Allowing the opposition to have a share in power does not require the incumbent elites to engage in a zero-sum game. To some extent, Egypt, Tunisia, and to a lesser degree Morocco have used this strategy. But the problem is that the incumbent elites become more reluctant to share power after a point. For example, in Egypt the ruling party was already guaranteed to win 85 percent of the municipalities in the last local elections; it insisted on capturing the rest as well and ended up by controlling 92 percent of the municipalities. This strategy runs counter to the power-sharing concept, and the Egyptian government ended up alienating groups whose support it needs.

Another explanation for the unwillingness of incumbent elites to disengage from authoritarian liberalism focuses on the weakening of the middle class as a result of economic

crisis and the perceived threat of Islamists. In North Africa, the weakening of the middle class has led to the declining strength of opposition political parties that have been among the principal advocates of political freedoms and democratic processes. The unwillingness of governments to move from liberalization to democratization was also influenced by their fear of the Islamists, who have managed to capitalize on the shortcomings of the state to increase their following among the poorer sectors of society. Faced with this challenge, governments have sought to curb the influence of the Islamists through controlled political participation.

Prospects for Political Liberalization

What are the prospects for political reforms in the Arab world? How are different regimes likely to respond to the pressures for liberal changes? There was agreement among the participants that political liberalization will not be on the agenda of the hard-line authoritarian regimes such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Iran, and Sudan in the foreseeable future. The prospects for political liberalization and democratization in the region's other regimes vary considerably. If Yemen succeeds in its efforts to create a competitive party system and free elections, it will make a major contribution to the strengthening of the democratic impulse in the Arab world. Some of the monarchies, such as Jordan and Morocco, have the strongest potential to proceed with gradual and controlled liberalization policies. But the continuation of Jordan's political liberalization experiment is by no means guaranteed: the country faces grim economic problems resulting largely from the Gulf crisis. The deepening of the economic crisis may trigger a reversal of the reform process.

The Gulf monarchies, to varying degrees, have also initiated liberalizing changes in recent years. One participant explained that the demand for change has come from the elites and not the masses. Both the secular elites and the Islamists have demanded an opening up of the political process, largely with the goal of creating greater governmental accountability and a role in the policy-making process. Those demands have created sharp divisions within the ruling families: while some have urged the adoption of political reforms, others have been reluctant to engage in power sharing. Kuwait, which has a history of parliamentary politics dating to the 1960s, decided to hold elections under increasing domestic and international pressures after the Gulf crisis. The election was held with very limited suffrage—only about 6 percent of the Kuwaiti population participated—and resulted in a major defeat for the ruling family. However, there is little likelihood that similar electoral politics will be permitted in the other Gulf monarchies. Yet the ruling families will be forced to make some limited concessions, following in the footsteps of Saudi Arabia's King Fahd, who promised to appoint members for a consultative assembly. The pressures for liberal changes will be on the rise in the Gulf monarchies, and the ruling families cannot afford to ignore them since they are voiced by influential elites. At the same time, if the ruling families decide to expand the scope of political reforms, they may run the risk of undermining their own power and authority.

Workshop participants agreed that the prospects for gradual progress toward democratization in those states that had created politically semicompetitive regimes appear uncertain. Some of these regimes have a relatively long history of experimentation with controlled democratic openings. For example, Egypt has had a multiplicity of parties and has regularly held parliamentary elections since 1976. However, in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, political reforms have stalled largely because of the unwillingness of the incumbent elites to engage in further power sharing with other political and social groups. According to one view, this has led to growing political instability in Egypt. The inability of the Egyptian leadership to

forge a new social contract or democratic bargain has prevented it from building up its guard against a takeover by militant Islamists. Since early 1992, Egypt has been sliding into the early stages of a form of guerrilla warfare as a result of a violence campaign waged by militant Islamic groups against the regime, foreign tourists, and the Copts. Unless Egypt implements new liberal changes, it runs the risk of encountering more instability and disorder in the immediate future.

The process of political change in Tunisia and Algeria has also been uneven and problem-ridden. In the case of Tunisia, the liberalization efforts began in the late 1970s with the recognition of some political parties. In the post-Bourgiba era, the government embarked on a more extensive reform policy by permitting competitive elections beginning in 1987. Algeria had a different experience: its authoritarian one-party regime banned all other parties and kept strict control on political opposition until 1988. The ruling National Liberation Front (NLF) then decided on a sudden change and moved quickly to establish a competitive political system. This abrupt attempt at democratization in the absence of prior political reforms proved unsuccessful, and the electoral victory of the FIS in the parliamentary elections prompted the military to intervene to prevent the Islamists from coming to power. A participant pointed out that Tunisia's more gradual opening up has proved to be more successful than Algeria's liberalization, especially with respect to the government's handling of the challenge posed by the Islamists. At present, the prospects for political reforms are not very encouraging in either country. The political circumstances in Algeria remain unstable, and the incumbent elites in Tunisia seem unwilling to expand the scope of power sharing through greater political liberalization.

The discussion of the prospects for liberalization in the Palestinian community included contrasting perspectives. One participant argued that he was moderately optimistic about the future of democracy when and if a Palestinian state becomes a reality. There is a historic record of participation dating back to the mandate period, as well as a history of pluralism in the Palestinian community. These experiences have been strengthened in more recent times: there has been growth in professional associations both in the occupied territories and outside, decision-making practices in Palestinian organizations have been based on consultation and consensus, and a new generation of Palestinian leadership committed to the establishment of a democratic state has emerged. Despite the absence of experience with political contestation, the Palestinians have the potential to establish representative institutions and processes. This perspective was challenged by another participant, who contended that the Palestinian leaders and organizations have not displayed much respect for liberal values and practices in the past. Consequently, it would be erroneous to expect them to practice democracy in the future if they establish a state of their own.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to predict whether the nondemocratic political systems of the Middle East will be transformed into liberal democracies in the near future. As the discussions in the workshop emphasized, some of the Arab regimes have experienced significant political changes as a result of democratic openings. Neither the potential for further political liberalization nor its possible unintended consequences should be minimized. Furthermore, the democratic initiatives in the Arab world come at an opportune moment in the broader international context. The end of the Cold War has terminated superpower rivalries in the region and deprived authoritarian regimes of external sources of support. Moreover, as a result of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, "the credibility of nondemocratic formulas for legitimation is at a new low" (Bermeo, 1992: 195).

Although some domestic and international pressures for political liberalization in the Middle East are likely to increase in the 1990s, there is no guarantee that they will in fact produce further democratic changes. Some of the regimes are likely to resist any attempt at liberalization and will continue to avoid political reforms. Others will try to ensure their survival through largely cosmetic changes and tactical measures. And some have the potential to move ahead with gradual and controlled liberalization that could eventually lead to the emergence of truly competitive political systems. However, as the experience of Turkey, a Middle Eastern state that has experimented with democracy since the late 1940s suggests, the transition from authoritarian to democratic politics is laden with difficulties, and the process can be temporarily reversed when there is widespread violence and instability or when the institutional interests of the military are challenged.

Workshop participants suggested that a number of issues need further research and discussion to better understand the potential for democratization in the Middle East. They include the strength and behavioral attributes of the new middle class, the interaction of economic and political changes, the issue of women's rights in societies in which Islamic movements have the potential to come to power peacefully through elections, and the status of civil society in the Arab world. The institutions of civil society appear to be particularly important, since its reinforcement holds the key for the strengthening of democratic values and institutions. The revival of civil society is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democracy. However, it is a process that often pushes liberalization into a democratic outcome (National Research Council, 1991:16-17). As one participant observed, the Islamists are either creating new networks of voluntary associations or penetrating existing ones, yet we know nothing about what values of tolerance they may or may not be inculcating in these groups, the basic building blocks of civil society. It is equally important, from a policy perspective, to find out the best strategies to help build civil society in the Middle East, since it may be a better strategy first to work toward the enhancement of the institutions of civil society, and then search for means of facilitating democratic reform.

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