

Arabs face dysfunctional democracy

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How much are the Arabs responsible for their own political dysfunction, national fragmentation and rampant violence, and how much of their troubles can be blamed on foreign interference and military interventions in the region? Two recent articles in quality American journals highlight how lowly Arab politics that are widely dissatisfying to their own citizens can reflect both indigenous autocracy and foreign mischief-making.

In an article in the May-June issue of *Foreign Affairs*, titled "The Price of the Surge: How US strategy is Hastening Iraq's Demise," Steven Simon, a former US National Security Council official and current Council on Foreign Relations fellow, methodically discredits the "surge" strategy adopted by American forces in Iraq. He views it as a short-term fix that will have negative long-term consequences for Iraq, because it actually has promoted forces that can degrade the country's national integrity.

Simon writes: "The surge may have brought transitory success ... but it has done so by stoking the three forces that have traditionally threatened the stability of Middle Eastern states: tribalism, warlordism, and sectarianism. States that have failed to control these forces have ultimately become ungovernable, and this is the fate for which the surge is preparing Iraq."

Simon sees the American surge as being anchored in the "retribalization" of Iraq, because it led to cash payments to induce Sunni insurgents who used to fight the US to switch sides and work alongside the US and the Iraqi government to fight Al-Qaeda-allied terrorists and other nationalist insurgents. Strengthening the Iraqi tribes will tend to splinter national cohesion and weaken the power and even the legitimacy of the state - a state painstakingly, if hastily, created in much of the Arab world after World War I by incorporating the tribes into state structures and payrolls.

Similarly, Simon argues that the surge is promoting competing local warlordism by arming and "empowering tribes and other networks without regulating their relationship to the state," thus allowing them to compete with one another for local control and "what is mostly criminal revenue."

Sectarianism is on the rise also, Simon adds, because Sunnis who have been bought back into national politics may see the US strategy as aiming to have them challenge Shiite supremacy, which will spark long-term sectarian strife.

"When it withdraws from Iraq," Simon concludes, "the United States will be leaving a country more divided than the one it invaded - thanks to a strategy that has systematically nourished domestic rivalries in order to maintain an illusory short-term stability."

For those who ask why the Arabs cannot run stable, peaceful countries, Simon's article offers at least one explanation that highlights the negative consequences of continuing foreign armed interference.

The second article notes instead the indigenous Arab causes of political tensions and potential extremism. It was published in the January issue of *The Journal of Democracy*, by Michael

McFaul of Stanford University and Tamara Cofman Wittes of the Brookings Institution, and is titled "Morocco's elections: The Limits of Limited Reforms."

The authors argue that Arab instability often reflects a lack of democracy. The parliamentary elections in Morocco last September, they argue, offered important insights into what might happen when Arabs are given a chance to engage in democratic politics - along with the dangers of autocratic leaders perpetually controlling and limiting democratic transformations from the top.

Three interesting results emerged from those elections, they write. First, when Moroccans were allowed to enjoy free and fair elections, they did not sweep Islamists into power, as had been widely expected. Many dissatisfied citizens chose other ways to express their concerns, including not voting or casting spoiled ballots. Second, the dominant Islamist party in Morocco, the Justice and Development Party, should not be seen as a threat to democracy, but its intentions can only be truly tested if it is allowed to share power.

Third, and most importantly in my view, the authors argue that "limited reform has a limited shelf life." Opening Parliament to democratic and free elections, while keeping all other powers in the firm grasp of the king, does not advance democracy. Moroccan voters were not fooled to rush and embrace a Parliament that enjoys "few core powers of governance," and they registered their discontent by staying away (only 37 percent of registered voters cast ballots) or by spoiling about one-fifth of all cast votes.

If Arab regimes shun the outright rigging of elections, and instead "configure the political system to contain the impact of popular Islamist parties ... the regime may compromise the democratic legitimacy of the process by distorting the link between the ballot box and the parliament chamber, making each new government look much the same as the one before."

As a result, McFaul and Wittes conclude, democratic reforms could lose legitimacy and tightly managed liberalization may push Arabs away from peaceful politics and toward extremism. Home-grown dysfunction and state collapse at the hands of foreign armies are equally deplorable, but they also are moving hand in hand in the Middle East today.

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