



## Common bonds in hope

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In Petra, **Gamil Mattar\*** finds shared concerns for democracy between Latin America and the Arab world

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I visited Petra years ago and once again during the past few days. I did not experience it this time as I had the last, probably due to the differences in season, company, and length of the visit. This time I beheld nature more beautiful in its innocence and harshness. Even the colours of the sunrise and sunset had changed, this time seeming shy and delicate, contrasting with the harshness of the hills and stones and yet overpowering them. As for the silence, it remains as it had been; pleasing and pure, just as it was dominating. My company and I agreed that the silence met our need to clear our minds of accumulated pollution and the clamour of cities with their chaos.

My company was different this time: it was a mix of intellectuals, officials and civil society activists from Chile, Argentina, Columbia, Mexico and Brazil, as well as Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait and Lebanon. The goal of our meeting, so far from the media and other distractions was for experts from Latin America to present the experiences of their countries in making the transition to democracy. Experts from Arab countries were to listen and then ask questions and present, if they liked, synopses of similar Arab experiences, including those that had halted or even suffered setbacks.

I don't think I have ever participated in an Arab conference without the voice of a participant rising to scream criticism or objections, or another participant being angry about faults in the session's organisation. I thus greatly feared that what typically takes place in Arab conferences would be repeated at this meeting, and expressed this to a colleague travelling with me from Beirut to Amman. This time, the participants were from two different cultures with different backgrounds. Some of them had been in the air for many hours, travelling from points on the Pacific Ocean in the furthest southwest corner of Latin America and other points in the continent's centre and west. They would have arrived exhausted, retaining only a little bit of patience with which to respond to detailed, difficult questions. And yet, no one soured the atmosphere for the conference. The topic drew our attention and the magic and silence of the location brought a sense of peace. The Arab participants wanted to learn, and this desire overcame all others.

I was not the only person to praise the presentations of the Latin American participants or the responses and questions of Arab participants; the benefit had was mutual. It will be

difficult to summarise our discussions in an article of the length I am allowed, yet I will select for the following lines some of the issues that raised both my interest and that of others.

We travelled to Petra preoccupied with the status arrived at in the transition to democracy in Latin American countries. We were told at the meeting that each state in Latin America had had its own experience, it not being possible to generalise for the entire continent. Despite this, however, it can generally be determined that none of the experiences have yet produced a pure democracy. What has taken place over the last twenty years is no more than the accumulation of steps in the process of transition to democracy.

In this sense, the experiences of transition in Latin America have differed from the experience of Spain. In Spain, democracy came thanks to the dictator Franco, who led the transition. General Franco was able to win over to the ranks of democracy an important sector of the ruling elite benefiting from despotism. No despotic ruler in Latin America or elsewhere has been able to do this, despite claiming that they are paving the way for the establishment of a democratic regime.

This Spanish development, in addition to those of other countries, verifies the statement that there is no such thing as democratic and non-democratic states. What exist are democratic and non-democratic systems. With regard to this discussion, I recalled how the American and British peoples were satisfied with non-democratic legislation forced upon them in the name of the war on terror, and how the Russian people granted the Kremlin ever-greater powers to secure national peace and economic prosperity. I don't even need to mention the Arab peoples who have chosen not to express in any way the need to establish democracy in their states. There are no democratic or non-democratic peoples, and there are no democratic or non-democratic states. There are only democratic and non-democratic systems of governance.

We also addressed the issue of the length of transition to democracy. It is natural that we Arabs want to be reassured that the period is limited and that at the end of the tunnel democracy awaits us. But we were not reassured, especially when we heard that the Mexican process took an entire century, from 1910 when the Republican Party took rule as a sole party, not allowing others to participate in or rotate power, until 2000, when Vicente Fox, from the opposition, nominated himself for presidency of the republic against the ruling party candidate. The dominant claim, over the length of a century, was that the party was preparing Mexico for democracy.

The presentations of the Latin American experts thus made it clear that the process of transition to democracy can run in two directions. It can move forward, gaining one victory after another in terms of accomplishments in democracy and human rights and freedoms. Yet it can also suffer one setback after another, and can halt or even reverse, in which case it should be termed retrogressive or characterised as frozen.

Globalisation has affected the speed by which the process of transition to democracy takes place. It has often been stated that globalisation may have come at an inappropriate time and thus hindered the process of transition to democracy. Proponents of this view argue that it is strong states that are capable of establishing democracy and that societies that have decided to make the transition to democracy at a time when globalisation is pulling at the state's power, forcing them to shrink in importance, have had bad luck. Globalisation demands that they leave sectors of society to govern their own affairs without intervention from the state, or with the least amount of intervention possible.

I am not alone in stating that the establishment of democratic institutions and the mobilisation of the people to support and protect them are responsibilities that weak or disempowered states cannot undertake. I have said before, and repeat here, that the foreign factor, which in our case is partly embodied by intense American interference in

our domestic and foreign affairs, carries a great deal of responsibility for the slowness and halting of the process of transition to democracy in the Arab world. This was particularly true when the United States directed international economic institutions to stipulate that the state withdraw from economic and social spheres at the same time that Washington was pressing for the establishment of democratic rule and society in Arab states.

We agreed at the conference to not allow the limitation of time allocated or the stunning natural beauty and wonderful silence around us to prevent us from having a deep discussion of an issue that has preoccupied political thought in all of the Latin American states and some of the Arab states: the role of the military in facilitating or hampering the process of transition to democracy. The point of departure for discussion of this issue was whether a society or political system can make the transition to democracy before military officials are convinced of it and practice it in their private lives and relations with other institutions in society. Responses to this question were both sincere and convincing. Intellectuals from Latin America have emerged from their experiences over the last 20 years convinced that if democracy is not strong and deeply entrenched within society there is no hope in convincing the military of the necessity of bowing to civil authority, a necessary condition for a serious transition to democracy. It is futile to enter into a process of transition to democracy if the military is not prepared to bow to a purely civil authority and convinced that democracy is the only tool that can be used in governance.

They also emerged convinced that the state, meaning the ruling regime and elite, is the only party that is capable of convincing the military of the superiority and utility of democratic values. If a state is not democratic, its military certainly won't be either. It is thus no surprise to find that despite the massive leaps made in the process of transition to democracy in Latin America, the gap between the aspirations of democracy proponents and the reality of the military remains large. More than a quarter of the residents in many of the continent's countries continue to lack a democratic orientation.

In other words, the possibility of the military resuming interference in the affairs of government remains standing, just as do attempts to prevent such interference. Such attempts may involve governments charging its armies with peacekeeping missions in locations around the world. Their preoccupation with preparing for this duty and a desire to perform it well is a form of compensation for the standing they have lost and confirmation that the state still needs them, particularly in a continent that is practically free of armed struggles between its states.

We left with many impressions; a significant one being that our governments and various institutions exhibit shortcomings in their international activity and still view that communication with any place in the world must pass through Washington. We know about Latin America, and it knows about us, what Washington wishes we know about each other. Decades ago, we passed through Paris if we sought Dakar from Cairo or Beirut. From Dakar, when travelling to another African destination, we would first return to Paris. Train passengers in Argentina, when reaching the border with Uruguay, used to disembark, carry their belongings a distance of some metres, and then catch another train in the direction of the capital Montevideo or other cities on the way to Brazil. The train tracks were different sizes from one country to the next in Latin America, which is how Britain governed and controlled its markets. Conditions have changed, but not the goals.

A lengthy discussion was held on the role of religion in the process of transition to democracy and the different circumstances surrounding religion in Latin America and the Arab world. We spoke about civil society both there and here, and the growing role played by domestic security agencies in both regions. The Latin American experts presented their experiences in reforming these agencies, convinced that there is no hope in a successful transition to democracy as long as domestic security is opposed to it.

The meeting continued without any monotony. We, participants of the Petra meeting, returned to our countries having shared a rich experience and renewed hope.

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