

The Strong Democratic Values of Arab Citizenries

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AMMAN, Jordan -- The debate over democracy in Arab and Islamic countries continues to twist and turn, responding variously to indigenous forces and to erratic perceptions from the West, especially the United States. New evidence of the native Arab commitment to human decency and democratic political norms comes this week from within, in the form of yet another relevant, quality regional poll by the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan. The findings and their implications are significant, especially in this violence-wracked region where the attempt to promote democracy via foreign armies, as in Iraq, has been catastrophic for local stability, Western credibility, the public relevance of local Arab democratic activists, and the good name of democracy itself.

First, a quick overview of the results. The poll of nationally representative samples of 1200 people in each of Jordan, Morocco and Lebanon (Egypt will follow soon), conducted in the past four months, shows that Arab publics are highly aware of the concept of reform and can define specific desired reforms, but there is less consensus on priorities among economic, political, administrative, anti-corruption and other kinds of reforms. There is strong consensus on key issues: democracy is the best way to solve national problems; foreign intervention hinders Arab reform; and, solving the Palestinian problem is a prerequisite to defeating international terrorism. Many but not all feel the Arab-Israeli conflict hinders political reform.

A majorities of respondents thought the best system of government for their countries in one in which the governing authority is elected, guarantees political freedoms, and is held accountable and overseen by an elected parliament. An average of just seven percent thought government by religious clerics would best improve their family's economic circumstances, while an average of nearly 50 percent thought democratic political systems were best suited for this.

Arabs, however, have mixed views about how serious their countries are about pursuing reforms (highest in Jordan, lowest in Lebanon), and agree that their countries should remain or become more open to the world. Strong consensus exist on the importance of basic freedoms (speech, press, elections, thought, movement, joining political parties) for enhancing democracy, but views are much more mixed on whether basic freedoms are actually guaranteed in practice. Less than half feel they can take legal action against their government or its institutions or (Jordan and Morocco) participate in peaceful protests and sit-ins.

Views are more varied on social, religious and cultural issues, especially women's status, parent-child relations and interpretation of religion (*ijtihad*). For example, strong majorities support equal rights for men and women in politics, employment, education and other core values, while a woman's right to travel alone enjoys somewhat less support. Strong majorities support the right of religious minorities to practice their faith freely and, for the most part, for Muslim scholars to present differing interpretations of religion.

The full results will soon be available on the website of the CSS at the University of Jordan, and should be seen as yet another sign of ordinary Arabs' foundation of life values that are democratic, pluralistic and tolerant, with strong specific commitments to freedom,

accountability, justice and equality in almost every human and public realm. Those of us from and living in the Arab-Islamic region experience this reality daily, while many abroad -- especially in post-9/11 America -- tend to look at our world and see mainly hotheaded extremists or irrational killers.

This poll and others like it in the United States, for example, should remind us how important it is to look at both of our societies with a combination of accuracy and nuance that is largely missing from the public debate these days. Arab-Islamic and American societies both comprise killers and saints alike -- masses of ordinary citizens with exemplary values, alongside minorities of zealots and criminals who do their deeds at home and abroad. Polling like this helps us grasp that complex reality. If assessed honestly, it can help us transcend the tendency of ideological zealots and intellectual skinheads in Washington, London and many Arab cities and Afghan caves alike, to perceive our two worlds in stark, black-and-white terms that are clearly not accurate or useful.

This poll is all the more hopeful because it is among the activities of the three-year-old and expanding Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), comprising 15 independent research centers and think tanks in the Arab world, Europe and the United States. The work and mere existence of ARI and other similar efforts that are not sufficiently appreciated abroad should help push us beyond the sterile and diversionary debate about whether Arabs, Islam and democracy are compatible. Rather, they should enhance the efforts of Arabs and colleagues abroad who work against great odds -- including repeated Anglo-American militarism, Israeli colonial exceptionalism, and enduring Arab authoritarianism -- actually to implement democratic forms and norms of Arab governance.

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