

Democratise or disintegrate

The failure of the Middle East democratisation project is not something to celebrate, even if outside forces championed it; it prefaces the disintegration of the Arab world, writes **Bahey Eldin Hassan***

The Arab world is living on the edge of a volcano as a result of the ever volatile interaction of a number of elements: the increasing influence and spread of terrorist groups; escalating Sunni-Shia sectarian violence; the phenomenon of private non-political militias; the growing influence of religious extremism within both the political and social realms; increased political authoritarianism; the continuing entrenchment of the police state; the increasing targeting of human rights defenders and democracy advocates within the larger regional context of a qualitative deterioration in the conditions of human rights in general; and finally, constant signs of probable civil and/or regional wars in and between a number of countries.

The "death boats" crossing the Mediterranean in the hope of attaining a blissful life in a European "paradise", the continuing waves of suicide bombers hoping to reach "eternal paradise", and the millions of Iraqi and Sudanese refugees crossing fault lines in Iraq and Sudan, or crossing seas and borders (even those of Israel) are only the warning flares of an eruption starting to rumble. When fully active, the lava of this volcano will flow across all borders and beyond expectations, so much so that the "new 9/11" will be much worse than even what the most pessimistic expect. Reaching this point was never inevitable; a number of factors have contributed to the creation of the current situation. At the forefront of these factors is the ebbing of the fourth wave of democratisation in the Arab world.

THE EBBING FOURTH WAVE OF DEMOCRATISATION: After three global waves of democratic transformation failed to sweep over the forbidding shores of the Arab world, the fourth wave broke at the edge of its impregnable fortifications, content to have swept over the defences of Serbia, Georgia and the Ukraine. This despite the fact that on its way to the shores of the Arab world the fourth wave had tremendous impetus towards this particular area, in large part due to the 9/11 attacks and the bombings in London and Madrid and ensuing specially-designed plans, whether European (the "Neighbourhood Policy"), American (the "Partnership Initiative") or international (the G8's "Forum for the Future"), which included the earmarking and disbursement of millions of dollars for these purposes.

Characteristic of the ebbing of the fourth wave of democratisation are: the waning of the EU's political will regarding the Neighbourhood Policy in the Arab world; the G8's Forum for the Future giving up its main objective, which was to be a forum for equal dialogue between Arab governments and civil society so that concrete steps on the reform process could be taken; the transformation of the US Middle East Partnership Initiative into a mere giant financial arm for money-pumping; the serious deterioration, verging on collapse, in the performance of forces advocating reform from within Arab societies; new international actors (Russia, China and Iran) that stand opposed to the international democratic agenda -- indeed, any democratic agenda -- and that are influential in political and economic action in the region at a time when American influence is waning, and will continue to do so, after the failure of the Iraq project.

The first three indicators took clear shape after the Muslim Brotherhood won 20 per cent of the seats of the Egyptian parliament in December 2005, and after Hamas secured a majority in the Palestinian elections in January 2006.

US SCHIZOPHRENIA ON REFORM: In reality, the process of deterioration was not slow; it was more like the proverb of "the straw that broke the camel's back." From the very moment these successive international initiatives for reform in the Arab world were announced they lacked the

necessary political will to drive them resolutely towards achieving their goals. They were more like declarations of political intent than an accurate diagnosis accompanied by practical plans.

The tug of war has not been settled between European and American priorities for security in the Arab world (which mainly require ensuring the stability of current regimes in most Arab countries) and the new post-9/11 priority of democratisation at the expense of these regimes. The schism between Europe and the US is not only one regarding the legitimacy and wisdom of the invasion of Iraq, but also one relating to the central idea of the project of democratic reform in the Arab world (ie the supposed close connection between ailing democracy and the generation of terrorism).

Meanwhile, the US seems inescapably schizophrenic: on one hand it calls for the respecting of human rights in the Arab world, and on the other commits some of the most blatant violations of human rights witnessed anywhere, in Guantanamo and Abu- Ghraib and elsewhere. In the morning they call for democratic reform in some countries and at night they use the secret prisons of those same countries to torture those whom the CIA's illegal extraordinary rendition flights deliver for the purpose of extorting confessions. On top of this is the Bush administration's public defence of a non-commitment to human rights standards (especially with regards torture) or international humanitarian law (especially in relation to prisoners at Guantanamo).

The incorrect diagnosis of the character of most of Arab ruling regimes -- as having a will to reform while in fact they stand against it -- played a role in blocking financial assistance to true advocates of reform and civil society organisations. A great part of foreign financial assistance went to concerned governments and governmental organisations under the illusion that it would be used to turn the wheels of reform. Otherwise it went into programmes imported from the experiences of countries en route to democratisation, and which are not suitable for authoritarian and anti-democratic states.

THE US MODEL IN PRACTICE: The "Tunisian model" crystallises the value of international reform initiatives. Tunisia has been the spoilt child of the EU, before and after international calls for reform. It is also the location chosen by the US for the administrative headquarters of its initiative to democratise the Arab world. Yet in two years of loud talk about reform, the Tunisian police state has not stopped for a moment its practices of violent repression, even during the convening of the UN World Summit on the Information Society, the government freezing European financial assistance to leading Tunisian human rights organisations without any European or American reaction commensurate to such humiliation.

In this context, it is not surprising that the US State Department considers Egypt's new constitutional changes, which aim at entrenching the foundations of the police state and endowing its practices with constitutional protection, as a step on the road to reform. Nor was it surprising that the EU blessed these changes indirectly by limiting its criticism to the fact that they were passed hastily through parliament, as if rapidity of promulgation overshadowed the spirit and letter of the worst legislative and constitutional setback in Egypt since July 1952.

Indeed, the best example to express the emptiness of the American project to democratise the Arab world is the fact that the very state on which they bet to lead the democratic transformation in the region -- Egypt -- has been precisely the one that adeptly led a systematic counter-offensive on local, regional and international levels, becoming, through this counter-offensive, even more despotic and authoritarian than before the American project was launched.

The fact is that the wave of democratic reform was exhausted before it reached Arab shores. Hence, with the return of Europe and the US to their pre-9/11 positions, the fourth wave left behind no significant mark on the ground; neither an instance of reform, whether constitutional, legislative or institutional, nor any change in power relations.

MEANS OF AVOIDING REFORM: With the exception of Morocco and latest developments in Mauritania, ruling regimes in Arab countries lack the necessary will to embark on political reform. Hence all their energy during 2004-5 was spent trying to relieve and absorb external and internal pressures. Much effort also went into exacerbating contradictions on the other fronts, whether internal or external, making alliances with the devil to forestall reform.

The outstanding adroitness with which the Arab ruling regimes, under the leadership of Egypt, managed this decisive crisis deserves to be an object of study in crisis management. If only these regimes had been managing their societies and providing for their needs with a mere five per cent of this adeptness they might not have needed to reform!

How did Arab regimes respond? First, by claiming that they have changed their skin and decided to respond to calls for reform; then by raising the slogan of Arab society "cultural specificity", and that reform comes only "from within"; raising the slogan of gradualism, arguing that the democratisation process took hundreds of years in European societies; and trying to undermine international consensus on the importance of reform in the Arab world and the methods of bringing it about by seeking to widen the gap between positions within the US political class and between the EU and the US.

Further, Arab regimes furnished Europe and the US with attractive offers for servicing their security interests in the region, especially given the rise of new regional security challenges in light of the following: the evident failure of the American project in Iraq; Hamas reaching power in Palestine; the rise of Iran as a regional power; and the exacerbation of the threat of exported terrorism. Yet such offers did not involve practical contributions to ending any conflict for the common strategy of Arab regimes has always been to keep regional conflicts hot, in order to stoke national security concerns at all times. Such concerns are employed with Arab peoples and the political and cultural elite in order to keep their attention focused on the "external enemy", thus indirectly supporting the legitimacy of no internal change. This strategy stops short of letting these conflicts heat up to the extent of threatening the interests of Arab regimes.

SCAREMONGERING AND TOKEN CHANGE: Arab regimes are also skilful in the use of Islamists as a scarecrow to dampen enthusiasm for reform, whether on the part of the international community or local political class -- liberals, leftists, secularists and nationalists. Egypt offers the best example. The last parliamentary elections for the first time took place without any member of the Muslim Brotherhood in prison. They had been all released several days before to enjoy, during the first round, the best political and security atmosphere in Egypt in the last 25 years! This had direct results, as the Muslim Brotherhood was able to hold 20 per cent of parliament. It was an excellent tactical win for the Islamists, yet it turned into a strategic win for the Egyptian regime, and other Arab regimes, as it helped settle the debate about European and American priorities to the benefit of regional security interests and at the expense of democratic reform in the Arab world.

Coordinating with the powerful Israeli lobby in the American Congress, stoking religious sentiments against the "crusading" West, and seizing the opportunity of the Danish cartoons affair to fan the flames of wide political, media and popular mobilisation while not even refraining from facilitating attacks on embassies, including setting them on fire, Arab regimes have used all means to distract attention from local contradictions and direct it towards foreign threats that "target" Islam.

Raising the flying colours of "women's rights" and organising a huge number of meetings and conferences, often with the presence of the Arab state "first ladies" and typically under the auspices of the Arab League, Arab regimes have used and blunted international pressures for reform by making concessions in domains that do not reflect directly on the political system and its balance of forces.

Finally, all forms of repression (security, legislative, media and administrative) have continued unabated during the two years of "progress towards reform", including using the media to wage intensified campaigns of character assassination against newly rising political symbols.

HOW HAS THE OPPOSITION RESPONDED? In addition to the astute efforts of regimes in the Arab world, the non-ruling elites in this region were not ready to lead the process of reform. They have suffered, historically and for several consecutive decades, from systematic and organised repression, with the assistance or collusion of the international community. This has caused them to be always limited in number, fragile and fissured.

Democratic reform has never been a solid priority for any significant sector of these elites. They have been concerned with other priorities, in particular Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, or the confrontation with the West in general. Hence, it is not a complete surprise to find that certain active sectors of these elites stand in the frontline of the confrontation with their own local regimes and ruling forces (on issues of democracy and human rights) while they support the anti-reform regimes in Syria, Lebanon, Sudan and others, and hold funerals in several Arab capitals to honour the mass-murdering "martyr" Saddam Hussein.

These views and positions, contradictory, hypocritical and lacking in any moral appeal, stand as one of the biggest obstacles to the possibility of enlarging the social base for reform.

The chronic failure of these elites to reach a consensual and creative solution for the issue of the relation between religion and state played a role in making democracy seem in the view of some sections of these elites a danger no less menacing than the persistence of the current despotic regimes -- more so even, given that democracy could bring the Islamists to power. An example of this is the position taken by sections of the leftist, secular and liberal elites in Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt (we can add Copts as a group in the latter). They have come to fear the consequences of "democracy" more than those of the continuation of despotism.

On the level of perspective and tactics, some of the new political groups embraced some exaggerated visions of their impact on the ground and/or the efficacy and stability of the international position in favour of political reform, and/or the weakness of the ruling regimes in a number of Arab countries, as well as the local power relations.

Based on such unrealistic assessments, some of these groups adopted self-defeating political and mobilisational tactics, and/or highly confrontational slogans against the ruling regimes, and/or set fantastical targets for their activism that were unrelated to the realities of the masses that have been excluded from the arena of politics and mass struggle for decades.

All of this led to utter failure to widen the ranks of these groups or attract mass support, and led to exhausting the energies of a limited vanguard in actions of which nothing remain but historical and media impact.

THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRATISATION: Due to these internal and external factors the fourth wave of democratisation failed to cross the frontier of the Arab world.

It goes without saying that the complete and utter failure of the project of democratising Iraq through invasion and occupation has had an additional restricting effect on the international community's vacillating will and on the internal processes in the region. In fact, there was nothing more criminal and brainless than the invasion of Iraq, except the reckless and irresponsible way the US managed the process of rebuilding Iraq after toppling Saddam Hussein's regime.

The exacerbation of the tragedy of the Palestinian people in the same period because of the unlimited political and diplomatic support that the US offers Israel, which has reached unprecedented levels,

has also played a large role in undermining whatever credibility was left for the US project of "democratising" the Arab world. This has been made particularly clear in the light of European/US reservations on the results of the last Palestinian parliamentary elections, which were the freest and fairest in the Arab world.

Moreover, the hike in oil prices in the same period provided Arab regimes with windfall profits that helped them widen their margin of manoeuvrability with their peoples in addition to filling the coffers of terrorist groups and religious extremists, which further assisted the counter-offensive.

THE COUNTER-DEMOCRATIC WAVE: The matter, however, has not stopped at the subsiding of the fourth wave; rather a counter-current gathered pace as the wave receded.

The most salient of its features are: first, the growth of forces of terrorism in the Arab world, with Iraq becoming a major base. Terrorism also returned to Egypt, finding a home in a completely new region -- Sinai. New cells sprang to life and carried out operations of differing degrees of violence in other countries (Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon and Gaza), with the continuation of the intermittent actions of sleeper cells in Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Second, the violent rise of sectarian and confessional identity in the region. The sectarian Sunni-Shia tension moved to the level of an intermittent civil war in Iraq, which reflected itself in the escalation of sectarian tensions in the region, particularly in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. In addition to the imminent danger of Iraq sliding into a bloodier unremitting civil war that leads to partition, another type of war has started in Yemen between the army and the Huthis (Shia Zaydi sect) in Saada, for sectarian and political reasons. Furthermore, the threat of civil war in Lebanon -- for regional, political and sectarian causes -- has been reignited.

Third, the growing phenomenon of private militias that constitute a unique mix of runaway offshoots of regular factions (while lacking any political agenda), gangs that plunder and loot, and bands of mercenaries that are paid to kill and kidnap. Iraq and Palestine are the most prominent examples of places where this is occurring.

Fourth, the rise in popular support for Islamist forces, given the bankruptcy and corruption of current regimes and the closing of all avenues of reform.

Fifth, Arab governments' intensification of repression after they realised that the international community had lost all interest in Arab reform. Repression surpassed its level prior to these international initiatives. Examples include Syria and Egypt.

Finally, the defeat of reformist forces in Iran after Khatami, and the rise of conservative forces that stand against modernisation and democracy and are more willing to base their regional projects on sectarian identity.

BAD AND WORST SCENARIOS: These indicators mean that there are two possible scenarios for the Arab region. The less bitter involves the continuation, for an indefinite period, of volatile sectarian tension that sometimes takes the form of intermittent bloody violence, such as in Iraq and Yemen, or ethnic and political conflict in Southern Sudan and intermittent bloody violence in Darfur, accompanied by political systems that are either police states or where repression is on the rise and unchecked by sufficient resistance.

The more bitter scenario involves the interaction of the above- mentioned factors leading to civil wars in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Sudan (in case the South moves towards separation, which is very likely), as well as consequences that are not less bloody in Syria, the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the probable scenario of an unremitting civil war in Iraq between a Shia majority and a Sunni minority could lead to more visible support for Sunnis on the part of Egypt and Saudi Arabia

(the same could be said of Lebanon), and could also lead to a direct military intervention by Iran, and perhaps even Turkey if the Kurds in the north declare independence while Sunni and Shia Arabs fight each other.

This is in addition to other probable wars that are unrelated to internecine Arab conflicts, such as an American or Israeli bombing raid on Iran to abort their nuclear programme, or perhaps new rounds of Arab-Israeli confrontation that are possible at any time, especially with Lebanon and/or Syria.

This second scenario means that the Arab region will be a volcano spewing fire in all directions, and beyond the region in all probability. Counter-offensives waged by forces of terror; religious extremism; sectarian violence; political authoritarianism and police repression, will not be confined to the walls of the Arab world. Dire and unprecedented consequences on the condition of human rights in the entire region will follow.

In order to imagine how dire it might be it is enough to note that the intermittent civil war in Iraq has already led to another "Palestinian tragedy": more than two million Iraqis displaced to neighbouring countries in the last two years alone; this on top of the internal displacement of between two and nine million more Iraqis. I wonder how many refugees and displaced will be created by an open civil war involving overt and covert regional military interventions? In such a tense and overheated region, even a country such as Morocco -- the only one to have had its own reform project before 9/11 -- will not be spared the ruinous spill over.

AVOIDING DISASTER: There is no chance of stopping this downward spiral unless the international community hastens to forge a more comprehensive and resolute reform initiative that would combine the requirements of democratic transformation and respect of human rights; combating terrorism, extremism and corruption; the immediate putting into force of a just solution for the Palestinian issue; and placing "failed states" such as Iraq under a UN mandate (Namibia before independence is a good example of this kind of plan). This, however, requires both ruling and non-ruling elites in the Arab world to rise to the level of meeting such grave challenges.

Powerful roaring waves sweep away barriers and overpass shores. Weak and waning currents, on the other hand, do nothing but stir up the bottom and muddy the waters. The fourth wave of democratisation has not only receded, it has also stirred up the silt of the ocean floor, spreading it everywhere across the region. A limited course of antibiotics can sometimes be more harmful than none as it can make the illness-causing virus more resistant and more vigorous. We must respond in kind, and with vigour.

** The writer is director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS).*