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## ARAB WORLD SEARCHES FOR DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

BY DAN PERRY  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAIRO (AP) -- "For too long, many nations, including my own, tolerated, even excused, oppression in the Middle East in the name of stability... We must help the reformers of the Middle East as they work for freedom, and strive to build a community of peaceful, democratic nations." - President George W. Bush in a speech to the U.N. General Assembly, Sept. 21, 2004



AP Photo/Hassan Ammar

Almost a quarter-century ago, a young American political scientist achieved global academic celebrity by suggesting that the collapse of communism had ended the discussion on how to run societies, leaving "Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

In Egypt and around the Middle East, after a summer of violence and upheaval, the discussion, however, is still going strong. And almost three years into the Arab Spring revolts, profound uncertainties remain.

That became shatteringly clear on July 3, when Egyptian generals ousted the country's first freely elected president, Mohammed Morsi, installing a technocratic government in the wake of massive street protests calling for the Islamist leader to step down. He had ruled incompetently for one year and badly overstepped his bounds, they argued. A crackdown on his Muslim Brotherhood has put more than 2,000 of its

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members in jail and left hundreds dead, and a court has ordered an outright ban on the group. Although new elections are promised, the plans are extremely vague.

All this happened with strong public support, especially among the educated classes where one might expect a strong yearning for democracy. Foreigners in Egypt were frequently stunned at how little many Egyptians cared that Morsi had been democratically elected.

How could that be? Around the region people are asking the question, and the stirrings of a rethink, subtle but persistent, are starting to be felt.

Few people - not even the absolute rulers who still cling to power in some places - would openly argue against democracy as a worthy goal. And people bristle at any suggestion that the region's culture is somehow at odds with freedom. But with the most populous Arab nation having stumbled so badly in its first attempt, there is now an audience for those saying total democracy must grow from the ground up, needs time to evolve, and need not be the same everywhere.

"Democracy is not a matter of principle or faith for most people" in the region, said political scientist Shadi Hamid, director of research at the Brookings Doha Center. "It is something they believe in to the extent that it brings good results. ... If democracy does not bring those things, then people lose faith in the democratic process."

"That's part of the story in the past three years," he said. "When push comes to shove, many say, democracy is fine in theory, but is not actually improving our lives. If the generals can promise us a greater degree of security and stability, we prefer that instead."

Oil-rich Gulf countries, meanwhile, have largely avoided the Arab Spring as the wealthy ruling families offered what has essentially been a swap - generous handouts such as state jobs and discount-rate housing in exchange for political passivity. The exception is Bahrain, where an uprising has been led by majority Shiites seeking greater rights in the Sunni-ruled kingdom, which is home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet.

Hamid, for example, is based in the Gulf state of Qatar, where no one expects democracy anytime soon. That's more or less the situation in the entire Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf area, where emirs and monarchs are for the most part firmly in charge. The same goes for Jordan, where officials offer learned explanations

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about democratic reforms that do not extend to relieving King Abdullah II of his executive power anytime soon.

"Most of the Arab rulers are trying very hard to give the impression to the West that their peoples are not prepared for democracy because these rulers are afraid that they are going to lose in any fair democratic elections," said Adel al-Baldawi, a history professor at Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad.

The region's experiment with democracy in recent years actually precedes the Arab Spring. The Palestinians, under the framework of their interim accords with Israel, held a number of parliamentary and presidential elections beginning in the late 1990s. Iraq has had several democratic elections since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein - part of then-U.S. President George W. Bush's vision for democratizing the region.

Few in the region today seem willing to credit that "Bush Doctrine" in the least with the Arab Spring that erupted in December 2010. More often cited are the explosion of satellite TV news stations, social media and mounting anger at decades of authoritarian rule. In swift succession governments fell in Tunisia and Egypt. Libya's dictator, Moammar Gadhafi, was toppled - and killed by a mob - in a civil war. All three countries have tried to set up democracies, with elected governments.

The results offer some cautionary tales.

Sectarianism and tribalism often override political debate - such as in Iraq, where Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites generally vote for their own parties. The violence-wracked country has ended up plagued by partisanship and political gridlock, its leader Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki accused by many of having authoritarian tendencies.

Existing parties in Jordan are even more granular, with some representing tribes. Critics say a healthy democracy needs a contest of ideas instead.

Another challenge is the level of education in some countries. All over the world voters face a challenge in grasping the increasingly complex issues of the day - but the problem is on a different scale in a place like Egypt, where about a third of the almost 90 million people are illiterate.

That provided a major opening to Islamists led by the Muslim Brotherhood, which successfully convinced many in Egypt's impoverished rural population that a vote for them was a vote for Islam. Critics saw an irony: Islamists, they argued, were great at using democracy for the ultimate goal of theocracy, non-democratic to the core.

In the Palestinian areas elections have been delayed for years and a split has set in between the West Bank's autonomy zones, run by an elected Mahmoud Abbas whose mandate has long expired, and the Gaza Strip, which was seized by the Islamic fundamentalists of Hamas, who make no democratic pretense today, although they did win parliamentary elections in 2006.

"Our Arab societies largely lack a democratic culture," said Majed Sweilem, a political scientist in the West Bank. "The democratic movements are weak and can't get to

power. The only ones that can get to power are the undemocratic forces that don't believe in real democracy."

Once in power, they can rule more or less at will, elections having lent legitimacy to an executive unencumbered by the basic infrastructure of democracy - the institutions, checks and balances that prevent a tyranny of the majority. That prospect terrified the elites in Egypt, where people are less traditional and many feared their lifestyle was under clerical attack.

Mohammed Magdy, a 27-year-old Egyptian, said the path to democracy would be long.

"The ballot box is one of the means of democracy . but (it is) not everything. At a time when there is popular action, it is not the strongest tool for change, because there are other ways," he said - such as protests and public monitoring of officials.

There have been some calls for denying illiterate people the right to vote, although they have not gained traction.

In Syria, of course, an Arab Spring-like revolt has morphed into a civil war whose rebel side is sufficiently dominated by Islamic extremists that it has been unable to muster effective Western support against authoritarian President Bashar Assad, despite more than 100,000 people killed.

In the Arabian peninsula and the Persian Gulf, rulers seem determined to maintain things as they are. Most countries have taken only small steps to take politics beyond the ruling clans.

"If the Gulf leaders needed anything to justify their crackdowns on political dissent, they have a perfect self-justification in the chaos in Egypt and other countries hit by the Arab Spring," said Christopher Davidson, an expert in Gulf affairs at Britain's Durham University.

Fawaz A. Gerges, director of the Middle East Center at the London School of Economics, said that "unlike eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s," which clearly wanted to emulate the West, "the Arab world does not know where it wants to go."

Gerges warned against assuming "that this transition will lead to Western-type democracy."

Perhaps religion will play a formal role in some places. Perhaps monarchs will retain a hand in the executive. Perhaps certain ethnic groups will have positions reserved for them, as is the case in Lebanon, where the president is a Christian and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim.

Francis Fukayama - the political scientist who wrote "The End of History?" in 1989 - said he still believes democracy is the direction of things. But subsequent events have shown that the road is long, and cultural differences may apply.

"Democracy in Asia ... doesn't look like European democracy - there are going to be variants all around the world," the Stanford University fellow said in an interview. "I

think people's expectations are too high for how quickly you can make a transition. The experiments we've seen (in the Middle East) have not worked very well, but they're also very real and these institutions just take a long time to evolve. Nationalism derailed democracy in the 20th century in Europe, (and) religion is playing a similar role in the Arab world right now."

"All of these places are going to look different, but they face a common set of challenges and there is a common evolutionary path."

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