



## Arab democracy

# A commodity still in short supply

**Despite a recent flurry of elections, true democracy is still a rarity in the Arab world. None of the explanations on offer is conclusive**

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EDITION



AUTUMN has been a busy season for Arab democracy—or at least the semblance of it. Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan have all run noisy general elections, and the Iraqi politicians elected last March finally, last month, came close to ending the haggling over how to share their spoils. Yet none of these exercises seems to augur deep democratic change.

Even adding the elections held over the past few years in places as diverse as Algeria, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen, the practice of democracy across the Arab world appears to produce much the same result: perpetuation of rule by well-entrenched strongmen, the demoralisation and sometimes radicalisation of the forces opposed to them, and the degradation of the word democracy, to the point where there is often little discernible difference between those Arab countries that make a show of practising it and those, like Saudi Arabia, that do not even pretend.

Two decades after the cold war's end prompted a global wave of democratisation, and nearly a decade after George Bush tried to stir his own hopeful wave, Arabs seem to remain unusually immune to democracy's spread. Of the 22 countries of the Arab League (of which admittedly several are not in fact Arab), only three can lay much of claim to being true democracies, and even those have flaws.

Iraq, despite continuing bloodshed, seems to have broken away from one-party rule but lacks a cross-sectarian consensus and decent institutions. Lebanon sustains an open and pluralist society, albeit fractured and polarised among and within sects and beholden to the feudal sway of powerful families. And the Palestinians freely elected a legislature in 2006, but the winning party was prevented from exercising power across the divided territories. Every Arab country now has a form of representative legislature, even if most have little power and some, like Saudi Arabia's, are appointed by a king.

Some of these autocracies allow more pluralism than others. Morocco, for instance, has widened

its space for debate. Others, such as Kuwait, allow a directly elected parliament, but the ruling royal family, still ultimately in charge, has often rued the legislative near-paralysis that followed. Several of the smaller Gulf monarchies seek gradually to give their people more of a say. But when democratic push comes to shove, the ruling monarchs are bound to slam on the brakes against democracy, for fear they may one day be toppled if people had a real choice.

Whether they are monarchies or republics, the Arab states tend to act much the same. In the words of Larry Diamond, a professor at Stanford University in California and an expert on democratisation, the Arab League has become, in effect, an autocrats' club. Even where democratic reforms have been imposed, their trajectory appears more cyclical than linear. More dissent may be allowed and practices such as elections pursued, but usually for window-dressing and letting off steam, and only until such time as autocratic rulers feel threatened.

Egypt's recent flawed election, which saw the ruling National Democratic Party push its parliamentary majority from 75% to 95% in a first round of voting, is a case in point. In the acerbic words of a columnist in *al-Akhbar*, a Lebanese daily, "the only progress witnessed by the electoral process was the rise in the value of the vote of the Egyptian voter from 20 [Egyptian] pounds [\$3.50] to several hundred."

The reasons for this democratic deficit have long been debated. Some point to Islam as a factor, others to the clannish and paternalistic nature of Arab societies. The fact that most Arab states rely on oil revenues rather than the taxation of consenting citizens is another oft-cited cause.

Some blame history's influence. Many Arab countries are artificial polities created by European imperialists, and have necessarily focused their energies on state-building rather than encouraging citizens to participate. Others point to geopolitics, contending—among other things—that Arab rulers use their interminable struggle with Israel to justify repression at home. Others still hold that Western powers, chiefly America, have sustained Arab dictatorships to secure the flow of oil.

All these arguments have some merit but need weighing. As many opinion polls have shown, Arabs sound keen on the idea of democracy. But what is understood by democracy, in a region with so few examples of it, remains open to question. Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, once described the Egyptian army as an example of democracy, on the ground that a commander weighs opinions from his officers before making a decision. By this definition, his party may deserve its name.

Islam as an ideology may be less of a factor. Though some strands of the faith, such as Salafism, reject the "rule of man", and therefore democracy, as incompatible with the "rule of God", quite a few non-Arab Muslim states, such as Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia, are fairly democratic. Still, lingering uncertainty over the proper relationship between religion and the state creates discord over how much space should be allowed for debate.

Many Arabs with liberal leanings, for instance, quietly prefer authoritarian rule to the unknown quality of a supposedly democratic Islamic state, something which Mr Diamond, in a recent essay, reckons that some 40-45% of the people in four Arab countries seem to wish for. He notes that another region that came late to democracy, Latin America, was similarly hindered by fear among the elite of revolutionary left-wing ideologies. By contrast, Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution, a Washington think-tank, says the Muslim Brothers, just trounced at Egypt's fake polls, have failed as an agent of change. So sure are they that God and history are on their side, he says, that they have grown complacent.

The pernicious influence of oil, along with other rents such as foreign aid, is easier to measure. Even non-Arab oil states, such as Angola, Russia or Venezuela, seem vulnerable to strongman rule. This is not just because the income frees states from having to bargain with their citizens. It

#### In the bottom division

Arab League\*

Overall democracy ranking out of 167 countries

|                         |     |                      |     |
|-------------------------|-----|----------------------|-----|
| Lebanon                 | 86  | Qatar                | 137 |
| Palestinian Territories | 93  | Egypt                | 138 |
| Iraq                    | 111 | Oman                 | 143 |
| Kuwait                  | 114 | Tunisia              | 144 |
| Morocco                 | 116 | United Arab Emirates | 148 |
| Jordan                  | 117 | Sudan                | 151 |
| Bahrain                 | 122 | Djibouti             | 154 |
| Algeria                 | 125 | Libya                | 158 |
| Comoros                 | 127 | Saudi Arabia         | 160 |

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2010, to be issued on December 8th \*Somalia not ranked

is also because any transfer of power means that rulers instantly lose the entire prize, making them all the keener to keep hold of it. Politics becomes a zero-sum game.

But perhaps the biggest factor is that Arab autocrats' skill at keeping their seats has by now been bolstered by custom. Most people are inured to authoritarian rule as a fact of life. As a peasant in the Egyptian province of Fayum lamented during the recent election, objecting to too many candidates vying for places on the pro-government ticket, "Things were so much easier a generation ago, when we all had to vote for the same man."

Middle East & Africa

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28 people

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