

## **Geographical Magazine**

A clash of cultures: while recent events suggest a shift towards freer forms of governance in the Middle East, the prospects for democracy in the region appear bleak. (Geographical dossier/democracy)

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Which would you like first, the good news or the bad news? That's the question democracy advocates have been asking in recent months, as events in the Middle East have begun to suggest a shift toward freer forms of government across the region.

January saw largely peaceful elections in Iraq, in which eight million people defied threats from extremists to cast their vote. In April, Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, became president and appointed a Shi'a Arab, Ibrahim Jaafari, as prime minister. Both Kurds and Shi'as were oppressed by Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime.

People are beginning to feel their own authority, to feel they can create things for themselves, which is the beginning of democracy," Iraqi Humam Hamoudi, a leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution, told the New York Times.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, the first half of this year saw popular demonstrations against Syria's military presence in Lebanon; demonstrations in Egypt, by a pro-democracy group calling itself Kifaya ('enough'), and in Bahrain, by Shi'as demanding greater representation; and pledges by Syrian president Bashar Assad to grant citizenship to the country's 300,000 Kurds and greater freedom to create new political parties.

The bad news, however, is making optimists pause for thought. Of the world's 47 Muslim-majority countries, only ten are classified by Freedom House as electoral democracies, and only two of those are deemed 'free'. And focusing specifically on the Middle East, the 2005 UN Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), published in early April, painted a bleak picture of the region's prospects for democracy.

The report itemises the factors, both cultural and political, that are likely to delay the arrival of pluralism and democracy. Arabs are progressively stripped of freedom: born into patriarchal clans, they are schooled by rote, and as adults are often citizens of nations without either multiparty elections or a free media. Even the region's geography works against democratic accountability. Oil-rich, many Arab states tax their citizens lightly, if at all--and if you don't pay into the system, you don't have much leverage to make demands of it.

Existing regimes hang on to power by invoking a "legitimacy of blackmail", the AHDR's authors suggest. If people believe the government they have is the only thing keeping a more repressive regime at bay, they are more likely to stay quiet about its shortcomings. Other regimes 'blackmail' their citizens with the threat of total collapse--Egypt, Syria and Sudan have been in an official state of emergency for decades.

Fear of extremist regimes keeps in check not only Arab peoples, but also some external advocates for democracy in the Middle East. "A class of countries has been deemed inappropriate for democracy due to the risk that radical Islamists would gain power," says Joe Siegle, citing Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Algeria as examples. Siegle, however, believes such claims just don't stand up. "In Pakistan, militant Islamists have grown more powerful under General Pervez Musharraf's dictatorship, and years of autocratic rule in Saudi Arabia and Egypt haven't made these countries immune from radicalism," he says.

Many have seen a hopeful sign in the success of the Arabic-language news channel Al-Jazeera, whose audience is second only to that of Chinese state television. "Of course Al-Jazeera is bringing democracy," a Jordanian politician told media-watcher Hugh Miles, whose 'biography' of the channel was published earlier this year.

"Before we had been ignorant about how Arabs lived in other countries; now Jordanians know and care about events on the other side of the world."

Miles himself is more sceptical. "If someone in Egypt or Saudi Arabia watching Al-Jazeera changes their mind about a certain issue," he writes, "there is still no political mechanism in place for them to do anything about it."

That mechanism must be created if democracy is ever to take root in the Arab world. "Democratic advances [in the Middle East] will require sustained efforts on the part of reformers from inside these countries to create the space for independent parties, a free press and an organised opposition," says Siegle. In short, the international community must send clear signals about the incentives for reform.

Whether or not the Middle East will democratise at all, however, remains to be seen. Direct intervention by foreign powers is one sure-fire way of swapping dictators for ballot boxes, but it runs the risk of alienating other nations, driving them instead into nationalist or fundamentalist extremism. US enthusiasm for further intervention may wane if dissatisfaction at home and criticism abroad mounts up, while homegrown democratic initiatives may falter under stepped-up repression, as is happening in Egypt.

"I don't believe the spread of democracy is preordained," says Siegle. But with the alternatives--in the Middle East and elsewhere--seemingly limited to autocracy, fundamentalism or quasi-colonialism, even sceptics agree: democracy will just have to do.