The Middle East's springtime of democracy

VIEW

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Stirrings of democracy have been crushed before: in Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968, and in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Yet something about the last few months feels new and irreversible. Too many people in too many places are defying their oppressors and taking risks for freedom. To a long-time activist, today's climate feels like spring

ELECTION RESULTS AROUND THE MIDDLE East mark a new trend: Islamist political parties — those that base their platforms on Islamic law — are highly popular. Where elections are held, Islamists do well: Hamas among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; the religiously-oriented Shi'ite coalition in Iraq; a parliamentary faction in Morocco and, most significantly, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey.

Democracy movements in Lebanon, Egypt, and elsewhere in the region must face the challenge of incorporating Islamist parties into democratic systems. But can the Islamists be trusted? If they rise to power, will they respect the rights of minorities and women and leave office when voted out? Will they tolerate dissent? Or will such elections be based on "one man, one vote, one time?"

As a sociologist, I have been studying these issues for 30 years. As an inmate of an Egyptian prison, I discussed them with my fellow prisoners, many of whom were imprisoned for being supporters of Egypt's Islamic movement. My conclusion? Islamist parties are changing.

These parties understand the social transformations underway in the Middle East that are leading towards democracy, and they want to take part. In my view, we may be witnessing the emergence of Muslim democratic parties, much like the rise of Christian Democratic parties in Europe in the years after World War II.

The Islamists' popularity is not difficult to understand. Since autocratic regimes in the Middle East left little room for free expression, the mosque emerged as the only place where people could freely congregate. Religious groups responded to this opportunity, emerging first as social welfare agencies, and then becoming the equivalent of local politicians. In the process, they gained credibility as trustworthy advocates of the people — a real distinction from repressive and corrupt governments.

In principle, it would be hypocritical to advocate democracy and at the same time the exclusion of Islamists from peaceful political participation. But the practice of electoral politics also gives us reason for optimism. By my count, some two-thirds of the 1.4 billion Muslims in the world now live under elected governments in which Islamist parties are players.

When Islamist groups are denied access to electoral politics, their cause takes on a mythic aura. Their principles remain untested ideals, never forced to confront the practical realities of governance. The late King Hussein took up this challenge in 1989, after bread riots in the southern Jordanian city of Ma'an. The King brought all the political forces together to draft a national charter for political participation. The Islamists signed on, pledging their respect for the rules of the game.

In the years since, Islamists have participated in four Jordanian elections. The first time, they gained a governing plurality, put their slogans into practice, and failed to maintain their popular support. In the four ministries the Islamists ran, they imposed restrictions on female staff members, triggering widespread protests that ultimately forced the four ministers to resign. Their share of the vote in subsequent elections declined sharply.

By contrast, it is a mistake to believe that force can eliminate Islamist movements. Instead, political reform ought to include them — under the following conditions:

- Respect for the national constitution, the rule of law, and the independence of the judiciary;
- Acceptance of the rotation of power, based on free, fair and internationally monitored elections;
- Guaranteed equal rights and full political participation for non-Muslim minorities;
- Full and equal participation by women in public life.

The role of external actors in promoting democracy in the Middle East is also critical. Much has been said of President George W Bush's American-led "crusade" to bring democracy to the Muslim world. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were predicated, at least in part, on spreading freedom; similarly, the Middle East Partnership Initiative is supposed to make democracy the centrepiece of American assistance in the region.

It is important to remember, though, that democracy was on the international agenda before the United States was attacked in September 2001. Under the Barcelona Accord of 1995, the European Union offered aid and trade to several Arab countries, in exchange for progress on democratic reform. The trade improvements have been delivered, but little has been accomplished on Arab domestic reform. In the 1970s, the Helsinki Accord helped bring down the Soviet Empire. We need a comparable formula for the Middle East.

Whatever one thinks of American military intervention, one must concede that it has altered the region's dynamics. Domestic opposition forces, while distancing themselves from the US, have been markedly emboldened in Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. We are all watching for signs of opening among our neighbours.

I know that stirrings of democracy have been crushed before: in Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968, and in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Yet something about the last few months feels new and irreversible. Too many people in too many places are defying their oppressors and taking risks for freedom. To a long-time activist, today's climate feels like spring. —*DT-PS*

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