

Tear up the Middle East map

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VIEW

FOLLOWING THE NEWS OF NAPOLEON'S spectacular victory at the Battle of Austerlitz, England's Prime Minister Pitt the Younger was reported to have said to his cabinet: "Fold up the map of Europe, we need it no longer." With one bold stroke Napoleon had checked the forces of his adversaries — Austria and Russia — and all of Europe was sitting at his feet waiting to be conquered.

Today, one is inclined to say the same about the Arab world. The map of the Arab world is being redrawn as we speak, and one could speculate that in a few years' time the Arab world as we once knew it will be no more. Following America's messy and bloody intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, it would appear as if the other Arab-Muslim countries in the region that stretches from the Mediterranean to Central Asia are falling over themselves to accommodate Washington's demands for reform and democratisation. Even in this Qatar and some other smaller Arab states have tried to be ahead of things by allowing reform long before Bush's 'Crusade' for democracy.

Developments in Egypt, Syria, Iran and Lebanon all point to the same conclusion: faced with the unpleasant prospect of having democracy delivered through carpet-bombing and cruise missiles, the leaders of the Arab world have seen the writing on the wall. They know the game is up. Perhaps the most surprising change has come in Saudi Arabia, which has allowed municipal elections (albeit without the participation of women). This, in the country whose rulers once claimed that 'democracy is un-Islamic' and that the only constitution that Muslims



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'winds of change' speech on the tide of anti-colonialism that eventually liberated Africa from the clutches of imperial rule in the 1960s and proclaimed that a 'wind of freedom' is blowing across the Arab world. While a 'wind of change' is indeed blowing across the Arab world, one is forced to ask which direction it is blowing from.

The 'wind of change' that blew across the African continent in the 1960s was, without doubt, an organic and local uprising. It carried with it the voice of the African peoples. From Franz Fanon to Patrice Lumumba, from Mehdi ben Barka to Felix Moumié, from Gamal Abdel Nasser to Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah — Africa and the Arab world produced a generation of nationalist leaders who were proud of their past, confident of themselves and looking forward to the future. It was for this simple reason — the pride and confidence of the new generation of Southern leaders — that so many of them (like Lumumba, Moumié and Barka) met their untimely ends at the hands of the secret police and intelligence agencies of the West, in many cases the CIA.

In their place the ex-colonial powers installed a motley crew of sycophants, cronies and toadies who served the interests of neo-liberalism to their end: Marcos and Soeharto in Asia, Mobutu and company in Africa, and the whole array of parasitic rulers we now see sitting on the thrones of the Arab world.

The 'wind of freedom' blowing across the Arab world today, however, is being fanned by the United States. If the earlier generation of Southern leaders proved to be the necrosis of the old colonial order and ultimately became the vic-

tim of the CIA, the new generation of cronies and puppets being installed is being helped into office by the CIA. The contrast is so obvious it hurts the eye to bear witness to it.

Faced with this reality, we return to the essential question: What is to be done?

For a start we need to recognise that the 'liberation' and 'democratisation' of the Arab-Muslim states is a colossal exercise in duplicity and double-speak. Despite the lip-service paid to the values of democracy and liberty, we are not any closer to witnessing the genuine growth of organic democracy in any of the countries that have come under Washington's long shadow. The elections in Afghanistan and Iraq have hardly altered the reality on the ground in either country. Indeed, the Taliban are being courted by the West. All that has happened is the opening up of political space so that new actors and contenders for the political prize can come to the fore and engage in the bargaining process with their Western counterparts and allies.

All over the world the hegemonisation of Washington's 'War on Terror' discourse — the parallel text to this discourse on democratisation — has also opened up new avenues and opportunities for Southern leaders who wish to dance to Washington's tune. The victory of Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra and Washington's decision to grant Thailand the dubious status of a 'major non-NATO ally' is a case in point. Nowhere in Thailand today can we see the democracy advance. Instead, the country is held hostage by a clique of powerful businessmen and politicians whose interests happily coincide with

those of global capital.

Will this be the ultimate fate of the Arab states as well? Already the leaders of the Arab world know that they are confronted with stark and difficult choices: reform and adapt, or be lumped into the 'Axis of Evil' and blasted to smithereens. The Arab world is indeed being modernised, reformed and — in a skewed sense of the word — democratised and liberated. But will this reform and liberalisation end up liberating the hearts and minds of the Arab peoples themselves? Or will it end up merely opening the economies and societies to external interests and the predatory demands of global capital? What and where will be the place for the ordinary man and woman in the new Arab world being created by the Bush war machine?

The first condition for dealing with the developments in the Arab world today is to understand that war and violence are never the means to bring about genuine democratic change. Democracy cannot be imported. Failed reform programmes that ended up bankrupting the economies of the former East European countries testify to this. The only democracy that can flourish comes from within. It has to mirror the aspirations of the people themselves. It is for this reason that so many Arab intellectuals and activists are wary of the 'wind of change' blowing through the Arab world. The 'wind' is coming from Bush Jr. Not surprisingly, it stinks.

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needed was the Quran.

President Bush Jr, already celebrating the uncertain victory, has paraphrased MacMillan's famous