

Support freedom in the Arab world

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The region needs to hear again that the course of freedom and democracy is the only course that America, guided by both interest and principle, will support

AS Arab and Muslim intellectuals and activists concerned about the promotion of democracy in our region, we call on America and its president to reaffirm — in words and actions — its commitment to sustained democratic reform in the Arab world.

We have been heartened by the strong commitment to liberty that President Bush expressed in his November 2003 speech at the National Endowment for Democracy and then in his second inaugural address, when he said: "All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: The United States will not ignore your oppression or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you."

Despite some initial scepticism, those statements nurtured hope in our region. We realise that democracy is not easily attained and must ultimately come from within. But it can receive encouragement and support, both of which it badly needs today in Arab countries.

We know that some in the United

States, worried by recent Islamist gains among voters in Palestine and Egypt, are having doubts about the wisdom of pushing for freedom and democracy in the Middle East. These worries are exploited by despots in the region to perpetuate the untenable status quo. But there is no way to advance liberty without inclusion of all elements that are willing to abide by democratic rules and reject violence.

Democratic participation is the only way to combat extremism and pressure

dom, peace and progress.

Perhaps emboldened by the impression that America is wavering in its support for democracy, some autocrats have recently intensified repression. This makes the need for sustained US and international support and pressure more urgent than ever. The region needs to hear again that the course of freedom and democracy is the only course that America, guided by both interest and principle, will support.

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all groups, including Islamists, to moderate their stance in order to maximise their share of the vote. The United States should continue to press for an end to repression by governing regimes of democratically minded liberal and Islamist groups, and it should emphatically distance itself from such repression and condemn it in the strongest terms whenever and wherever it occurs. We are confident that if Arab citizens are able to have their choice, they will choose democracy, free-

To mention but one case where US influence might do much good: Egypt has experienced a regime crackdown lately on opposition activists. In February the government postponed municipal elections and renewed the emergency law. The regime has not even spared Egypt's venerable judiciary, which has steadfastly proclaimed its independence in recent months. And liberal opposition politician Ayman Nour, who was allowed to run in last

year's presidential election and won 8 percent of the popular vote, behind only President Hosni Mubarak, was arrested and sentenced in a murky process to five years in jail.

The health of Ayman Nour, a dear friend and colleague of many of us, continues to deteriorate. We pray that President Bush will take Nour's case to heart and tell the Egyptian regime of his concerns. Hundreds of other activists (including doctors, university professors, journalists and those in civil society) whose only crime was to express their desire for freedom continue to languish in jail and suffer torture and police brutality.

We entreat America to do all it can to ensure that a small number of authoritarian rulers will not control the future of more than 300 million Arabs, more than half of whom are not yet 20 years old. Freedom and democracy are the only ways to build a world where violence is replaced by peaceful public debate and political participation, and despair is replaced by hope, tolerance and dignity, courtesy the Washington Post

This article is adapted from an open letter to President Bush signed by 103 other Arab and Muslim activists and thinkers in Arab countries, Europe, the United States and elsewhere who have worked in support of democracy (see)