Prospects of Democracy in Arab States*

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Democracy is one of those concepts that do not lend themselves to easy definitions; and, because of this, there is no agreement on a universal definition for democracy. "Democracy seems especially difficult to define because it is not a given or a thing in itself but rather a form of government and a process of governance that changes and adapts and responds to circumstances." (Robert L. Rothstein: Democracy, War, and Peace in the Middle East 1995 P 65) Nevertheless, there is no way to avoid accepting a certain definition to evaluate democratic systems and measure democratic progress. According to Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, democracy is "a form of government in which a supreme power is vested in the people or in their elected agents under a free electoral system." To me, democracy is "a system of governance that regulates the relationship between the state and the public in ways that enable the governed to elect their governors and hold them accountable."

Social, cultural, political and economic change in society is caused by many factors that can be grouped in four societal processes: the sociocultural process, the political process, the economic process, and the infomedia process, which combines the media and information processes. These processes live a life of continuous change, causing all sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural conditions to change continuously. Democracy, being a sociopolitical process, has no choice but to change as conditions change to remain relevant and meet people's expectations. On the other hand, people's perceptions of democracy have taken different ways and varied institutional forms. Peoples, having different cultures and historical experiences, have influenced the democratic process differently and caused it to travel at different speeds in different countries and times.

For example, Arab and Chinese emphasis on the rights of society rather than on the rights of the individual are largely perceived by the West as violating individual rights and thus undemocratic. In contrast, western emphasis on individualism and individual rights is viewed in China and most Arab and Muslim countries as giving priority to individual interests over society's interests. Westerners in general tend to view society as a group of individuals with different rights, not as a community of people with collective rights. As such, most Arabs and Chinese consider the western system of democracy vulnerable to misuse by the rich and powerful individuals and groups. Other nations, especially those dominated by religious or nationalistic ideologies, tend to consider democracy a system that fails to protect religious dogma and recognize cultural particularism. Such thinking seems to claim that religion, culture and a nation's cultural heritage have more rights than people are entitled to have. Because of these differences of opinions and perceptions, many political theorists today limit the definition of democracy to the holding of regular elections. Any system of governance that holds elections on regular bases and allows power to be transferred peacefully is considered democratic.

In this paper, I shall look at democracy in general, trace its historical development, identify the forces that are largely responsible for its success in the West, and identify the forces that hinder its development in Arab states. Furthermore, since I do not believe that the current Third World socioeconomic and sociocultural environments are conducive to the nurturing of western style democracy and democratic institutions, I shall suggest a new formula for a democratic system that has a good chance of working in the Arab world.

The Rise and Decline of Democracy

The development of democracy occurred in several countries almost simultaneously causing the concept and its application to assume different forms but not different characteristics. However, the origins of democracy and its basic principles of equality, justice and accountability could be attributed to organized religion. Since its inception in ancient times, religion has declared that every person must answer to a higher authority. The three monotheistic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - state that no one is exempt from the commandments of God

and that all people are equal in his presence. These principles and similar religious teachings led eventually to ameliorating the status of slaves, at least in the eyes of God, and to undermining the rationale for absolutism of temporal authority. Yet, despite these seemingly democratic principles, kings and emperors of the past were able to rule with absolute authority. To legitimize absolutism, such kings and emperors embraced religion and claimed to be gods or directly related to gods, or gods' representatives on earth authorized to rule in their name.

When nation states began to appear in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, their rulers at the time were at odds with the Catholic Church. European rulers, driven by a strong desire to build independent nation states, sought the help of merchants and city dwellers. While rulers needed the financial support of merchants to build national armies, merchants and other city dwellers were particularly interested in protecting their social and economic freedoms. However, while rulers and merchants were cooperating to achieve their particular goals, new ideas and changing life conditions were transforming the way of life and way of thinking in most countries and posing a great challenge to both the theocratic state and the nation state. As Van Doren said, "It would not be long before the despotic monarchies that had replaced the earlier communes would also lose their power, beset and overthrown by the new image of man, and not God, as residing at the center of things." (Doren, 1991 P 158)

The intellectual origins of democracy, however, are rooted in the political philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and the United States. The separation of religion and state following the conclusion of the religious wars in 1648 paved the way for religious and social tolerance that enabled people to live without much fear. The leading political thinkers of the time articulated individual rights, emphasizing the responsibility of government to protect such rights. Nonetheless, intellectuals raised the concern that the state might move to replace the Church and confiscate individual rights. As a result, European intellectuals in general called for limiting government intervention in people's lives, particularly in their pursuit of liberty and happiness. Rulers and monarchs of the post-Reformation era were happy to see people concentrate on material gain rather than on religious beliefs.

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution in the second half of the 18th century, slums emerged in industrial European cities to house the poverty-stricken and badly exploited workers, while capitalists were accumulating wealth and living in affluence. However, within the span of a century, the situation of the poor was transformed gradually and a new society slowly emerged in all industrialized countries, having three distinct socioeconomic classes: a working class, a middle class, and an upper class. Though relations between these three classes were generally conflictual, all classes, and particularly the middle class, accepted political plurality and participated in the development of democracy and its institutions.

Democracy legitimized by a new political philosophy, supported by a vibrant middle class, and invigorated by a productive capitalist system was able to make progress and deepen roots in industrial society well into the 20th century. Yet, despite the convergence of several factors that fostered the democratic idea, the gradual emergence of a solid and conscious middle class was probably the most significant development. By the end of the 19th century, the middle class had become responsible for most industrial diversification, for advancing and protecting democracy, and for developing and fostering a national culture.

When the nation state and capitalism were emerging in the 17th and 18th centuries, the political and economic processes were working together to undermine the power and sociopolitical influence of the Church. However, it was not long before the economic process achieved societal eminence, using deeds rather than words and employing money and the media in the process. Money, without which neither state nor politics could function properly, was used to manipulate politicians, making elections eventually an unequal contest between those who have money and others who do not. Money and the media were also used effectively to manipulate the public, and mold and remold peoples' attitudes and cultures.

By the middle of the 20th century, the triumph of economics over politics was almost complete. This triumph represented a significant setback for democracy as well as for both politics and culture. With the advent of globalization, things worsened as capitalism transformed itself into a global economic process with unlimited access to world and investment markets. In fact, one can probably argue that the 1917 communist revolution in

Russia was the last attempt by politics to control economics. The failure of the revolution therefore ended all hopes that politics could control economics. Capitalism, consequently, emerged as a major force having the power to determine the fate of nations, shape national politics, and greatly influences the fortunes of individuals.

While politics was losing its objectivity due to the influence of money and the state was losing its ability to define the national interest and care for the common good, the public was losing its sovereignty; it could no longer resist the temptations of the new luxuries of life produced by capitalism, or avoid manipulation by the media. By the end of the 20th century, the media had become a business concern with one major objective in mind: the making of money and the promotion of the ideas and lifestyles of the rich and powerful. This, in turn, further weakened politics in general and democracy and its institutions in particular.

During the first half of the 20th century, which witnessed the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and WWII, the Marxist system posed a serious challenge to the capitalist, democratic one. Consequently, the capitalist state was compelled to raise taxes, implement new social programs to protect the public from the extremes of capitalism, empower workers, and create a welfare state to help the poor and the unemployed. Both the upper and middle classes, provided, rather willingly, the money needed to finance the new programs because they feared socialism, its premise of class conflict and its promise of classless society.

Decades later, neither class was willing to continue financing the mushrooming welfare programs. While the cost of such programs was increasing without an end in sight, communism was failing everywhere. Consequently, the upper class and, to some extent, the middle class as well began to call for smaller governments, lower taxes and reduced spending on social programs. As a result, the 1990s witnessed the triumph of the ideas of the rich and the financially comfortable. A "culture of contentment" soon emerged to tie the wealthy, the media barons and their managers, members of the upper middle class, and the comfortable among the retired elderly. It is a culture, "of a new, loosely connected groups of unequals sharing an interest in preserving the status quo and ignoring the poor, the common good, and the future for the sake of the present," said Galbraith, (Galbraith; 1992 P 13)

Under the influence of capitalism and because of pressure applied by special interest groups on behalf of the rich, the western welfare state in general began to retreat. Social responsibility toward the poor, the elderly, and community began to lose appeal. Poverty and all social ills associated with it, particularly crime, drug use and abuse, homelessness, and violence began to spread slowly and become endemic. "The fortunate and the favored, it is more than evident, do not contemplate and respond to their long-run wellbeing. Rather, they respond, and powerfully, to immediate comfort and contentment. This is the controlling mood." (Galbraith, 1993 PP 6-7)

In the 1950s, while still fighting with politicians to gain complete independence, the capitalist class urged western governments to give special attention to the needs and desires of the economic elite. One of capitalism's stern advocates at the time, American banker J. P. Morgan, said in a US Senate testimony, "if you destroy the leisure class you destroy civilization." Morgan defined the leisure class as "all those who can afford to hire a maid." (Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. 1958 P 479) By the end of the 1980s, the leisure class had triumphed, and the gap that separated it from the rest of society had become not only socioeconomic but sociocultural as well.

The triumph of economics over politics made the political process a mere tool in the service of the economic elite that had incorporated the media elite. Democracy, consequently, lost its ability to do the things it was supposed to do; it lost its vision as well as its mission. Walter Lippman said decades ago, "In the cold light of experience, [the private citizen] knows that his sovereignty is a fiction. He reigns in theory, but in fact he does not reign. Contrasting the influence he exerts with the influence he is supposed to exert according to democratic theory, he must say of his sovereignty what Bismarck said of Napoleon III, at a distance it is something, but close to it, it is nothing at all." (Cited by Richard Harwood, 1996 P A 21)

In the United States, which is considered the bastion of democracy, the democratic process has become a passionate pastime game suitable to entertaining people rather than to informing them or protecting their rights and effecting societal change. In this game, which resembles a basketball game, the number of players is small, while the number of spectators is

large. A small number of interested spectators make up the cheerleading squad, whose members perform to entertain the public and excite the players. To ensure good performance, players are coached by political and media advisors, whose services are sold to the highest bidder. Players engaged in this rough political game are handsomely rewarded and promoted by the media, regardless of the outcome of the game. In fact, the more infamous a player is the more famous he or she is likely to become; infamy in America is no longer a stigma that calls for exclusion. Rather, it is a business opportunity exploited by the media and the capitalist system. Players, coaches, and managers who fail to perform to owners' expectations are often dismissed; a few lucky ones, however, are usually recycled.

During the heat of the game, players fight hard to win, and coaches and managers sweat to keep their jobs by keeping their players in contention. The public, on the other hand, is divided between those who pay to attend, cheer, jeer, and get emotionally involved in a game that has little lasting impact on their lives, and others who watch the game on TV or choose to ignore it. Yet, the entire public, regardless of its involvement, ends up paying the price for enriching the players and coaches, for making many of the infamous famous, and for enabling the capitalist process to become more dominating and ruthless. (Rabie; 2001 PP: 214-5) Former US President Gerald Ford described American elections as "candidates without ideas, hiring consultants without convictions to run campaigns without content." (Quoted by David Broder, 1999 P A 37)

Democracy in the West in general and in the United States in particular has become a game played by the affluent and powerful according to rules of their own making to maximize benefits and exclude the other. "The rich and comfortable have influence and money. And they vote. The concerned and the poor have numbers, but many of the poor, alas, do not vote. There is democracy, but in no slight measure, it is a democracy of the fortunate." (Galbraith; 1996 P. Working together, the economic and media processes shape public opinion, and largely determine the outcome of elections before the public goes to the polls. Charles Lewis says, "The wealthiest interests bankroll and, in effect, help pre-elect the major candidates months and months before a single vote is cast anywhere. We the people have become a mere afterthought of those we put in office." (Cited by Broder, 1996 P A 21)

The greatest damage the merger of capitalism with the media has done to society is seen in the relentless campaign of the new alliance to subordinate human behavior and ethical standards to the economic imperative of moneymaking and wealth accumulating. People's fears, instincts, desires, and even evil tendencies are often awakened to create new human needs for the economic process to exploit. Excitement is heightened and envy is provoked to exploit people and make more money. People who enjoy success and have wealth are considered right; people who experience the pain of failure and suffer poverty are considered wrong. "In post-democratic America, we understand that the rich are rich and, therefore, good; the poor are poor and therefore bad." (Schillinger, 1995 P: C1) Today, no one asks or even seems to feel an obligation to ask how money was made or how ethical were the means used to acquire it. Consequently, a new subculture emerged where greed is considered good, and wealth is considered the primary, if not the only criterion by which personal success and social worthiness is measured.

The negative impact of the media on democracy is further aggravated by their successful attempts to undermine freedom of speech, limiting it to people who own or manage media outlets and to their associates and cronies only. The media give the wealthy and the infamous the power to set standards for what is moral and what is not; what is fair game and what is not, and what success means and what failure entails. Moreover, the western experience in general shows that members of the ruling elite who are politically influential, wealthy, and media savvy, are able to gain more power and wealth and use both to claim special privileges unavailable to the public. They are even able to use their political and economic power to manipulate people and deny some of them opportunities to which they are entitled in a democratic society.

As these developments were transforming national politics, globalization was transforming international economic and knowledge structures as well as national cultures. Globalization driven by a free market ideology has caused wealth and economic power to be concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of multinational corporations, thus weakening states' control over their economies and destinies. Multinational corporations know no political borders, respect no national sovereignty or cultural identity, belong to no ideology, and have no

commitment to any cause, except the cause of maximizing profits and tightening control over world production, markets, technologies and knowledge.

Western democracy in general seems to have reached its limits as a progressive political system; it faces many problems at home that force it to struggle to retain relevance. Nevertheless, democracy is being promoted worldwide today as a prerequisite for socioeconomic transformation and protection of human rights. However, nations that are being enticed or coerced to import democracy tend to lack the proper understanding of the essence of democracy and its sociopolitical and sociocultural consequences. Because of the profound changes the world had endured over the last few decades, democracy has become like an old, overworked airplane whose capacity to perform is doubtful and whose maintenance costs far exceed its utility. Yet it is being exported, using the carrot and the stick, to nations that do not know how to use it and cannot afford its maintenance cost.

There is no doubt that democracy as a political system has achieved great things in areas related to political participation, freedom of speech, social justice, social security and welfare, human rights, and equality of opportunity. However, I believe that its greatest success has been in its ability to transform itself from being solely a political system of governance and into a sociocultural value; an attitude that governs individual and group relationships in society. In the industrialized nations of the West in particular, democracy has become a mindset that induces people to accept others as equals, to recognize and respect their rights, and to resolve conflict with them peacefully. This is why democracy, despite its shortcomings, has survived the weakening of its foundations; and why faith in its institutions, though shaken, has not been lost. Democracy entails much more than participation in politics to ensure equality of opportunity; it serves also as a cultural value that nurtures tolerance and helps establish the principle of mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence in society.

For democracy to have a chance in Arab and non-Arab nations living in pre-industrial times, it must be promoted first and for most as a sociocultural value. Recognizing that people are different and respecting their rights to be so, leads naturally to creating a culture of tolerance; a basic democratic requirement. A society where tolerance prevails, and where everyone has

equal rights, provides for equal opportunity and a fair game; two major democratic objective. In addition, compromise becomes the tool of choice to solve conflict with others peacefully. To reach such an understanding of democracy, people need to internalize the democratic principles through the upbringing process at home and the educational process at school, which require a great deal of cultural and educational transformation and political change. I strongly believe that if democracy exists as a sociocultural value, democracy as a political system will eventually succeed and flourish. However, if democracy fails to establish roots in society as a sociocultural value, no truly democratic system of governance will see the light of day.

Arab Prospects of Democracy

Democracy as a political system and as a sociocultural value has succeeded in all industrialized societies; it has also failed in all pre-industrial ones, with the exception of India, where democracy has continued to struggle without much success or major failure. For example, despite the emergence of extreme nationalistic ideologies in industrialized Germany and Italy, democracy has survived and eventually flourished. In contrast, despite internal and external pressure on states such as Egypt, Pakistan and Colombia, democracy has failed to lead to popular political participation, equal opportunity, or respect for human rights. As for India, I believe that the philosophy of non-violence preached by Ghandi to resist foreign occupation and unify the Indian people has been the major force that enabled India to internalize certain democratic principles and survive as a struggling democracy.

In the wake of the dramatic ending of the Cold War, democracy and capitalism emerged as the most promising political and economic systems, if not the only legitimate ones. They appealed to the great majority of peoples everywhere, and particularly to those who lived longest and suffered most under authoritarian communist regimes. The infomedia process helped people become more aware of the promise of both democracy and capitalism, causing the largest and widest wave of democratization and respect for human rights in the world. By the beginning of the 21st century, almost every state was a legitimate democracy, a democracy in the making, or claimed to have embraced the democratic principles.

Yet, authoritarian rulers, autocrats, and hard-core ideologues everywhere still resist the new ideas; they are accepting only cosmetic changes that lack substance. Even the acceptance of cosmetic change is driven largely by a desperate need to encourage foreign aid and revive stagnating national economies. Such rulers are hoping that the economic restructuring programs imposed by the IMF, the World Bank and the US government will enable capitalism to deliver on its promise before political reforms take roots in society and undermine their authority. However, no economic restructuring can produce economic progress without sociocultural restructuring, and no genuine sociocultural transformation can take place without genuine economic development. Paul Kennedy wrote, "There exist a dynamic for change, driven chiefly by economic and technological developments which then impact upon social structures, political systems, military power and position of individual states and empires." (Kennedy; 1987 P: 439)

Democracy as we know it today appeared only after the industrial revolution and the emergence of a strong and confident middle class in industrial society. The subsequent emergence of an influential and free press was another force that fostered democracy; it made governments more accountable and less able to conceal major mistakes or make major decisions in secrecy. The success of the Reformation movement was another major step on the road to democracy. As the Westphalia Treaty of 1648 called for the separation of state and religion, it paved the way for the emergence of a more tolerant culture. I believe that all people of the world are indebted for whatever religious and social freedoms they may have today to the Protestant Reformation movement of the 17th century.

The western experience, where democracy was developed and institutionalized, suggests that democracy as a political system has certain requirements, without which no democratic system could function properly, meet people's expectations and be fair:

1. The presence of a middle class large enough, independent enough, and conscious enough that knows its interests and protects them. "Only a middle class that is educated, capable of reflection, and aware of its interests and tied to a productive process will foster truly serious participation." (Hermassi, 1993 P 49) Alexander Campbell adds, "A collectivity of

economic middle classes, sometimes overconfident, sometime uneasy, but never reduced to despair, is the condition of democracy." (Campbell, 1993 P 6)

2. A free press committed to informing the public, facilitating freedom of speech and playing an active, yet neutral role during elections and political campaigns.

3. Political plurality that gives citizens real choices between competing political parties and ideologies, guarantees minority participation and prevents majority domination.

4. A culture of tolerance that recognizes cultural diversity, promotes mutual respect, and defends individual and group rights.

While the shortcomings of western democracy have become many and evident, the number one problem facing all democracies today is the gradual deterioration of the status of the middle class. Due to the self-serving activities of the media and capitalism, the middle class has begun to lose its independence as well as much of its self-confidence. The middle class in democratic societies in general and in the United States in particular has become like a runner who runs on a treadmill. He runs faster and faster just to stay in place and avoid falling off the treadmill track. Nevertheless, struggling to stay in place causes people to become exhausted, weakened and often dizzy and disoriented. People who are particularly vulnerable because of poor health, old age, or inadequate education are falling off the track and joining the ranks of the relatively poor.

Nonetheless, to evaluate the future prospects of Arab and non-Arab democracy we must recognize that the only society in history that has produced a truly independent and conscious middle class is the industrial society. The tribal society has had one class only; the agricultural society has two classes; one rich, and one poor. The emerging knowledge society is expected to have more than three sociocultural groups, none of which promises to have the characteristics of a traditional middle class. "The industrial society was the only society in history to produce a credible middle class; neither the tribal, agricultural, nor the knowledge society did is able to produce such a class." (Rabie, 2001 P 264) In the fast emerging global village, the knowledge society, generally speaking, would represent the world's upper class, the industrial society the

middle class, and the agricultural society the poor. Meanwhile, the pre-agricultural society would represent the world's poverty-stricken underclass.

Today, while the economic process has gained near total control of the political process, the media have practically confiscated and virtually assumed the traditional role of political parties in democratic society, rendering all parties less relevant than ever before. Money buys access to power, access to power guarantees influence, and influence changes reality to suit money's desires. "As the political parties have sunk into a state of virtual political irrelevance, journalists have become the new bosses of presidential politics. They are the power brokers and character cops who dominate the process of identifying, advancing and publicizing the people who would lead the nation" (Harwood, 1995 P A 21)

Even freedom of speech in America has virtually disappeared; it is limited only to those who own a media establishment and to others who manage it for them, as well as to their favorite "experts" who promote their sociocultural views and business interests. Freedom of speech must be understood not only as having the freedom to say whatever you think privately, but to say it publicly via a medium that enables your ideas to reach their targeted audience, which only the media can facilitate but rarely allows to happen. The Internet is the only possible media outlet that has the potential to challenge media conglomerates and provide an alternative venue for the free expression of opinion. However, if the merger of America On Line with Time Warner is an example of things to come, the Internet will soon be placed safely in the back pocket of business concerns.

During the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the American mass media found itself in bed with government, promoting the war and justifying its material and human costs. When an American correspondent was criticized for his biased reporting, he said, "we need to win the war, I love my country," as if loving one's country demands distorting reality and making facts out of fiction. The peace forces, that protested the war and organized demonstrations in which more than 100 million people participated worldwide, were dismissed by the mass media as a movement of marginal leftists groups. Clear Channel Communications, a giant media organization that controls 1,200 radio stations, or some 40% of the total radio stations in the

United States, was not only dismissive of the protestors, it organized counter-demonstrations in support of the war. "Now the company," Wrote Paul Krugman in the New York Times on March 25, 2003, "appears to be using its clout to help one side in a political dispute that deeply divides the nation." As for the control of politics by economics, Krugman adds, "On almost every aspect of domestic policy, business interests rule."

The media and the wealthy have since the 1980s begun to blame the poor for their poverty, as if discrimination does not exist or matter. Meanwhile, the economic process has continued to emphasize the need to reduce the cost of production to maintain its ability to compete internationally, when most competition in reality takes place between American and other western multinationals. In fact, it is estimated that about two-thirds of American imports are produced by foreign subsidiaries of American multinational corporations. While the economic process continues to exploit the poor, squeeze the middle class, and pollute the environment, the infomedia process continues to manipulate the young, the uneducated and the most vulnerable, and pollute the social environment for all generations to come.

Political plurality in western democracies in general consists today of two major parties or two blocks of like-minded parties. Since the early 1980s, members of the political elite in each country, regardless of party affiliation have begun to move toward a middle point in their sociopolitical orientation. They have in fact become members of one sociocultural group tied together by shared interests and a common subculture that colors their views and largely shape their attitudes towards others. The collapse of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet empire on the one hand, and the weakening of the middle class and labor unions on the other, have given political elites in most western states an opportunity to join ranks and rule unchallenged. Consequently, change has become subject to the will of those who control the major societal processes, the economic and the media processes, not the public or its democratic institutions. As a result, political plurality has become a historical phase that is ending; it is being replaced by sociocultural plurality that does not behave according to the old rules that gave rise to and largely fostered democracy.

One of the unexpected, yet far-reaching developments of the age of knowledge is the increasing segmentation of society into competing sociocultural groups. Unlike socioeconomic classes, members of such groups share more values and ideological convictions and little interests; and, because of that, they include the rich, the poor, and many more people in between. Yet both the rich and the poor of those minorities share very little with either the rich or the poor of other minorities and majorities in the countries they live in. The religious right in America, for example, is such a group. Other minorities in the West, such as North African Arabs in France, Indians in Britain, Turks in Germany, and Koreans and Mexicans in the United States represent distinct sociocultural groups. Democracy, which gave minorities the freedom to voice their differences on the one hand, and instant communications, which gave them the means to link together on the other, has made this unique development possible. The Internet revolution allows once ignored and even shunned groups and minorities to become organized and energized; it enables them to create special communities based on cultural values, shared beliefs and age-old traditions. The most conservative of such communities are today creating *cultural ghettos*, where the body lives and functions in the new homeland, while the mind and heart live and dream in the old one.

Interests that differentiate socioeconomic classes from one another are usually subject to political compromise and therefore do not normally weaken tolerance or undermine democracy. In contrast, values and beliefs that divide society into sociocultural groups do not lend themselves easily to compromise and therefore tend to weaken tolerance and undermine democracy. Thus, the increasing sociocultural segmentation of society is expected to have a negative impact on both tolerance and democracy.

Arab societies, even those that enjoyed racial and ethnic homogeneity in the past like the Egyptian, are witnessing the segmentation of their societies into sociocultural groups. Economic duality, religious revival, a widening knowledge gap, and exposure to the lifestyles and cultural values of an affluent West have affected different segments of each society differently, causing them to divide into different sociocultural groups. In addition, being largely agricultural, Arab societies in general are yet to have the social and economic structures capable of producing

and supporting a true middle class that is aware if its social status and economic interests and able to develop a class consciousness of its own.

Democracy in Arab and most other Third World countries is still an idea or a state of mind, not a state of political and sociocultural affairs. In those societies, democracy is more like a wild flower still struggling to find the right soil and kind hands to plant it, nurture it and care for it. While several attempts were made to plant the democratic idea in different Arab countries, no place has so far been found hospitable enough to help it grow and flourish. Because of this fact, democracy has failed to transform any Arab or Muslim society in its own image at either the political or the sociocultural level. Arab culture, Islam, and traditionalism are often blamed for the failure of democracy in Arab and Muslim states.

It is easy to blame traditionalism, Islam and the overall Arab-Islamic cultural context for the failure of democracy; yet, almost all other non-industrialized societies still live under political systems that are largely undemocratic. Authoritarian political and social structures, lack of economic development, a weak civil society, lack of tolerance, and high rates of illiteracy are major factors causing democracy to fail as a political system and confuse understanding of it as a sociocultural value. The stage of civilizational development in which a society lives is probably the most important determining factor that makes democracy feel at home in certain societies and just a wandering wild flower in most other ones.

Today, every society that is industrialized has a functioning democratic system; every society that is industrializing and about to complete the transition from the age of agriculture to the age of industry is either democratic or actively democratizing. Every society that is still in the pre-industrial age lives under an absolute monarchy, a theocracy, or a dictatorship. Claims to the contrary are mere claims to deceive and hide the truth. Democracy was the product of industrialization and religious reformation and the many philosophical and scientific developments that preceded and accompanied industrialization in the West.

Looking at Third World nations in general and Arab ones in particular, it is not difficult to recognize that the basic requirements for the flourishing of democracy are either very weak or

do not exist at all. Neither a large and strong middle class exists, nor political plurality or a free press, which the state is either fully or partially own and control. What might appear as a middle class and considered often as such by most Third World specialist is a collection of different groups of people that have very little in common and do not even understand the meaning of class-consciousness. These are small and large groups working for a weak business community and the many bureaucratic institutions and agencies of the state as members of the army, the secret service, the diplomatic corps, and other educational and economic institutions. Since most members of these groups are state employees, this seemingly middle class is largely dependent on the state, works for different and often competing institutions and agencies, and thus lacks independence, self-confidence, a solid economic base, and, above all, class-consciousness.

As for political plurality, while it may exist in theory and appearance, it does not exist in reality. Among the several Arab states that adopted democracy and claim to practice it are Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen. While all such states have given a wider margin of liberty to the press and allowed elections in which more than one political party participates, no functioning democracy has appeared in any of them. Arab democracy has continued to be a show meant to entertain and deceive, not to inform and instruct. For example, all members of all political parties in Jordan account for much less than 1% of the total population; in Morocco where political parties are relatively old and numerous, members of all parties may reach 3% of the total population. During the 2002 general elections in Morocco, no party presented a genuine program of political, social or economic action, and none has taken the position of a true opposition. The religious parties were an exception; they developed popular slogans attractive to a largely religious public, but failed to articulated credible socioeconomic or sociopolitical programs.

One might argue that time has been short for Arab democracy to take roots and flourish. However, when such a claim is examined in light of what has been accomplished in European countries that emerged recently from the ashes of communism and totalitarianism, the failure

of Arab democracy becomes undeniable. Forces that hinder Arab democracy are structural in nature and therefore, time is not capable of addressing them by itself.

While Arab societies in general lack political plurality, every Arab, Muslim, and Third World nation has sociocultural plurality rooted in tribalism, clannishness, ethnicity, religion, cultural particularism, or sectarianism. In addition, manifestations of the capacity to acquire and use wealth and knowledge in this age have become sociocultural divides by and in themselves. The culture or, to be more accurate, the subculture of the poor and the uneducated is very different from the subculture of the rich and knowledgeable; they separate the two groups from each other not only by income, life comforts, and places of residence, but also by lifestyles, values, attitudes, associations and expectations. Such socioeconomic gaps and sociocultural divides have made it hard to talk about the existence of a national culture or a national society in any state, rich or poor, developed or underdeveloped. While socioeconomic gaps are usually interest related, sociocultural divides are value related; the first tend to lend themselves easily to political compromise, while the latter do not; and where compromise is not possible or difficult to achieve, tolerance is either weak or does not exist, making political plurality and thus democracy hardly achievable.

Elections in Jordan, for example, have always produced parliamentary members who represent the country's clans and ethnic groups, not popular representatives with new ideas and clear sociopolitical philosophies. In Yemen, elections produce people that represent tribes and clans; traditional leaders interested in maintaining their power and privileges. In Lebanon, all elections are games fought by an exclusive political and economic elite that claims to represent the country's many sectarian groups, but works to divide the political and economic pie among its largely corrupt members. Moreover, elections in some states showed that people in large cities had the lowest ratio of participation; however, people in rural and tribal areas were more enthusiastic to participate. A causal observer might conclude that political awareness is growing among the poor and the uneducated; but appearance is deceiving. The higher ratio of rural and tribal participation reflects the strength of traditional loyalties, not

appreciation for democracy. This is a sign that the old system has found a new way to go around democracy and use it to perpetuate its traditional influence and power.

In other Arab stated such as Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, only political parties approved by government are allowed to enter the race. Most elected candidates usually represent the governing party or parties willing to play by the rules set by the ruler. A ruler elected to govern for a specific period, usually becomes a ruler for life, winning elections, often by majorities that exceed 90% of votes. This fact has given rise to the phenomena that could be called *Jumlakiya*; a hybrid word of the Arabic words for republic and kingdom. Most Arab republics today seem on their way to becoming one type of ***Jumlakiya*** or another as each president prepares a son to succeed him after death. While death was the only act of God that could free Arab people from some of their "elected" leaders a decade or so ago, most Arab presidents are today on their way to confiscate death and make this act of God an opportunity to promote their descendants and perpetuate their undemocratic, largely corrupt rule.

Free press also does not exist in Arab countries, despite the fact that satellite TV channels are making it possible to dream of such a possibility. Some might think that the new stations in Qatar, Dubai, Lebanon and Egypt are independent; and therefore are paving the way for an Arab free press to emerge. One must not confuse state competition and ruler jealousy with free press. Since no Arab state is democratic enough to allow a free press to function without interference, none of the TV channels is truly independent or free. In addition, all of those channels are business concerns that, just like their American counterparts, are largely interested in making money, not in informing or educating the public. Nevertheless, the new satellite TV channels, especially the Jazeera have exposed the deficiencies of Arab and Islamic systems of governance and raised much doubt about the legitimacy of Arab leaders in general and their intentions and competence in particular; a positive development that promises to produce some badly needed change.

In addition, Arab societies in general are experiencing religious revival that causes ideological polarization, threatens all political systems, and works, though unintentionally, to deepen the sociocultural divides in society. Many internal and external factors have contributed

to the current wave of Islamic fundamentalism; however, the failure of the secular state system and its policies to meet people's social, economic, political and security expectations is probably the most important one.

The democratic system we know today is ill equipped to deal with situations characterized by ideological polarization and deep sociocultural divides; it has no constitutional provisions or institutional structures to address such issues. Sociocultural divides call for the sharing of power among by the many sociocultural groups, not for political competition among socioeconomic classes. Regardless of their nature and objectives, social systems, of which democracy is one, have lives of their own that could be short or long, stagnant or dynamic, dull or interesting, but never perpetual. All social systems after reaching maturity develop a tendency to become stagnant and often obstacles to change. This makes them systems in need of restructuring or replacement. While modifications may be sufficient in the short run, restructuring or replacement is inevitable in the end.

Arabs societies, being a product of the pre-industrial stage of development, are yet to experience the kind of social transformations and economic change that demands liberty and supports democracy. As for Islam, there is no doubt that the religious leadership is generally opposed to the practice, institutions and, more importantly, the legitimacy of democracy. When many Arab and Muslim leaders discovered in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that they were lagging behind the West in economic, scientific, industrial, military and even cultural terms, they called for reform. Some thinkers, the secular and enlightened ones in particular, interpreted this call as a need for borrowing from the West and imitating some of its societal institutions. Others, however, mainly the conservative forces interpreted the call as a need for Islamic revival, not for religious or cultural reform. The split regarding the approach to change was in reality a philosophical divide that eventually led to the appearance of two distinct movements: the first fundamentalist, the second secular.

The reformist school called for change and adaptation; its advocates saw no fundamental contradictions between western notions and practices of democracy and scientific research, and Islam. The major question to them was not to borrow or not to borrow, but how can

Muslims acquire western science, technology and management institutions and remain true to their religion and culture. Islam and democracy, they maintained, are compatible since both embody the ideas of justice, equality and freedom. Rifat al-Tahtawi, for example, said, "What is called freedom in Europe is exactly what is defined in our religion as justice, right, consultation, and equality." (Hamid Enayat, 1988 P 131)

In contrast, the fundamentalist school moved to reject all western ideas, claiming that the West and Islam represent two different ideologies and civilizations that are incompatible. The major question to followers of this school was and still is how to reform the West, not how to reform Islam. They further claimed that Arabs and Muslims are backward because they abandoned Islam and because the West colonized them and corrupted their societies by its ideas and permissive culture. The only solution to the Arabic/Islamic dilemma, they maintain, is Islam, which holds the key to a happy life on earth and to salvation in the afterlife. As for democracy, fundamentalists found it incompatible with Islam because it derives its legitimacy from the people, not from God who is the only sovereign. They, furthermore, reject dissent because they see it as a challenge to the *Umma* or the unity of the Islamic community and its basic beliefs. Sayyed Qutob, the leading thinker of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, argued decades ago that Muslims should not consider reality as a basis requiring revision of Islamic thought; they instead should try to change the immoral reality to conform to Islamic standards. It is clear that this kind of thinking does not accept reality and therefore cannot reconcile itself to its imperatives; it accepts neither compromise nor can it facilitate the nurturing of a culture of tolerance. In fact, no society living in the pre-industrial stage of civilizational development has enough diversified economic activities, a relatively high standard of living and an educated population to produce a genuine middle class, political plurality or a culture of tolerance.

Since the democratic system is not identical or successful everywhere and has no universal definition, it would be unwise to think that any Western formula can be implanted in a Third World state without basic modifications. Different cultures and varied life experiences and times demand different political systems that take into consideration the particularities of each society and the stage of civilizational development in which it lives.

A Proposed Formula for Arab Democracy

Based on the above, and in order to begin to transform the Arab political culture, we suggest a new formula to spread the idea of democracy in Arab society. The major objective of this formula is to facilitate the creation of a liberal environment conducive to the development of democracy as a sociocultural value, and to the nurturing of a culture of tolerance. In fact, I strongly believe that if democracy were to succeed as a sociocultural value, democracy would ultimately succeed as a political system. However, if democracy fails as a sociocultural value, democracy would have little chance of succeeding as a political system. Moreover, if tolerance is either weak or absent in society, no progressive democratic system would function properly. The proposed sociopolitical formula calls for the following:

1. The strict separation of the three branches of government, the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judiciary in order to strengthen the courts system, guarantee its independence, and prevent any branch of government from dominating society.

2. Parliamentary elections to be held regularly, and for giving all parties the right to field candidates of their choice without government interference; nevertheless, candidates are required to have at least a high school diploma to run for and hold office.

3. Limiting the number of parliamentary seats that any political party or minority could hold to 25% of the total; no party, regardless of its size and popular appeal, would be allowed to have a majority of seats in parliament. The reasons behind this non-traditional propositions are two:

a. No political party anywhere in the world has enough members to represents a majority in society; all parties based on their active memberships, are small minorities. Therefore, having 25% of seats in parliament far exceeds any party's representation in society. Since only small majorities of people usually vote in national elections, no political party or ruler can have majority support of people, and therefore should claim a national mandate to govern.

b. Where the major dividing lines in society are sociocultural, allowing a single party to have majority seats in parliament would deepen the sociocultural divides, encourage discrimination, heighten sociopolitical polarization, and affect tolerance and thus democracy negatively.

4. Membership in parliament to be limited to parties that win at least 5% of the popular votes in order to limit the number of active parties in parliament and weaken the ability of the smaller ones to hold government hostage to narrow viewpoints and special interests.

5. Allocating seats in parliament to minorities commensurate with their population size; however, to be granted this right, any ethnic, religious, cultural or national minority, must account for at least 3% of the population and ask to be treated as a minority.

6. Allocating 20-30% of the parliamentary seats to the major civil society organizations; each organization or association would get a number of seats commensurate with its size and involvement in societal life. The rationale behind this proposition is simple: the executives of civil society organizations are likely to be elected by better educated members who are more aware of the important issues facing the nation, and more committed to serving the public than the average citizen is. In addition, the election process in such organizations is usually more open and fair and thus harder to manipulate. Civil society organizations, moreover, usually have many more members than all political parties and are more likely to represent all segments of society and deal with all issues facing it; and by giving them parliamentary seats, the proposed formula gives them an added incentive to become more active and more involved in public life.

7. Giving parliament the responsibility to appoint a prime minister, approve all cabinet nominations, and dismiss the prime minister and his or her cabinet when deemed necessary. The prime minister, however, would be elected by parliament from outside its ranks. The prime minister, in turn, would name all cabinet members from outside the parliament. A prime minister elected by a parliament in which no political party has anything close to majority, would guarantee that the elected person is a well-known and highly respected personality and, most likely, an independent thinker or a popular civic leader committed to the national good. In addition, this provision would confine party bickering and ideological infighting to the halls of

parliament, giving the prime minister and his cabinet the time to concentrate on managing the business of the nation.

8. Instituting term limits that provide for parliamentary change and continuity; elected members would not be allowed to stay in office for more than three 4-year terms, and no more than one-half of parliament would be elected in each election cycle.

9. Giving the head of state more powers than a European constitutional monarch usually has, but less than an Arab monarch or a Third World president like to have. Traditions in Arab society and its largely hierarchical social structure dictate that the head of family, organization or state should have real powers and clear authority. France provides a good example of power sharing between the prime minister and the president to be emulated by Arabs seeking to transform their political culture and system of governance.

10. Instituting a decentralized system of government that guarantees fairness and allows political parties to have majority in elected regional councils and form local governments. This provision should give parties the opportunity to rule at the local level, and motivate regions to compete in improving public services, attracting investment capital and tourists, and revive cultural activities. The decentralization provisions, however, do not allow a regional council to change federally mandated systems, particularly the educational and sociocultural systems to serve its political or ideological agenda

11. Leaving the armed forces outside politics and putting them under civilian command.

It is clear that the proposal democratic formula requires the writing of new constitutions for every Arab state. The new constitutions would define the domain and limits of each branch of government in ways that ensure the separation of powers and the sharing of responsibilities. In addition, there is also a need for a "bill of rights" similar to the American one to recognize, define and protect people's rights and freedoms, particularly freedoms of speech, association, religion, and the right to private ownership and the pursuit of happiness.

Since the state came into existence thousands of years ago, men and women have continued to struggle to define, claim and protect their rights. They used religion, philosophy,

logic, science, manipulation, law, revolution, and appeal to gods and temporal power to get what they thought had always been theirs; at times they had to resort to violence to attain some of their rights. Nevertheless, despite the many life achievements in all endeavors, the struggle for freedom and equality is still incomplete; in fact, it may never be completed.

Democracy has been one of man's notable achievements on the way to freedom and equality of rights and opportunities. While democracy has succeeded as a sociocultural value, its success as a political system leaves a lot more to be desired. As a sociocultural value, democracy deserves to be embraced and should be helped to deepen its roots in all societies and cultures. As a political system, however, democracy seems to have reached its limits or to be approaching the end of its productive life; it thus needs restructuring. Without restructuring, democracy would not be able to retain relevance, regain people's confidence, and be able to articulate a new vision and carry out its noble mission in this turbulent world.

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