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Prospects and Challenges for the Development of Middle Eastern Democracy

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This essay aims to explore the prospects and challenges for democracy in the Middle East, as well as argue that although democracy may be flourishing again, after many years of little democratic progress, there remain many obstacles in the way, hindering its development. However, before this can be attempted one must first define what is meant by the 'Middle East'. This in itself however, possesses a challenge. The Middle East could be taken in a purely geographical context; the countries situated globally at the crossroads of the world, where North meets South and East meets West (Hanafi, 1998)^[1]. However, for all its broadness, such a term fails to take into consideration the Islamic countries of Northern Africa such as Libya and Egypt, who would certainly consider themselves more 'Arabic' than 'African', and indeed share more cultural and religious characteristics with their 'Middle Eastern' counterparts. For this reason, this essay will therefore define 'The Middle East' as the term descriptive of all Arab countries, including those in North Africa, as well the likes of Iran and Israel, who do not see themselves (on the whole) as Arab, but are geographically placed amongst the Middle Eastern block.

However, ambiguities of definition also extend towards the meaning of democracy. It should be asked, what criteria must Middle Eastern countries fulfil to be considered democratic?

For clarity's sake, this essay will only use the term liberal democracy, and its sub contents of free and fair elections; protection of rights; and the rule of law; when referring to a countries development to democracy, instead of the often interchangeable and undefined terms such as pseudo, weak, partial and formal democracies, (Carothers, 2002)^[2] and when focusing on quantative data, will only use Freedom House and Polity IV's data sets, for continuity of definition.

Before assessing the current state of democracy- which admittedly is an a state of flux at the moment in large swathes of the Middle East- it is perhaps pertinent to consider how democracy had developed across the region in the past, and the reasons why it had failed to diffuse successfully; and indeed, the challenges these reasons may still present to the thorough establishment of democracy in the region. Historically, there can be no doubt that the region has been strikingly resistant to democracy (Norton, 2009)^[3]. Karatnycky (2002)^[4] even goes as far as to state that there are no true democracies in the Arab world. It can also be said that when much of the world was experiencing Huntington's 'Third Wave' (2002)^[5] of democracy in the 1980's, most Middle Eastern countries lagged behind, or did not experience much, if any democratization at all. In support of this argument, one can put forward evidence by Stephan et al. (2003)^[6] whom, using a collation of rankings made by the Freedom House Reports and the Polity IV Index, show that only one Arab country, Lebanon, has ever had three consecutive years of relatively strong political rights in relation to democracy. This however, was before fifteen years of civil war broke out in the county, certainly negating such a claim now.

The 2010 Freedom House Report, an annual survey which rates the rights and freedoms of citizens in every country, concluded in its findings that the Middle East "remained the most repressive region in the world" (Freedom House, 2010)^[7]. This raises the inevitable question as to why the Middle East has struggled to start and maintain democratic development.

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One argument is the belief that “the idea of democracy is quite alien to the mindset of Islam”, (Kedburie 1992, cited by Norton, 2009)^[8] in other words; democracy is incompatible with those of a Muslim religion. This can be collaborated with the fact that out of the 47 countries in the world with an Islamic majority, only 23% of them have democratically elected governments. In comparison, out of the 145 countries where Islam is a minority, 76% contain democratically elected governments (Karatnycky, 2002)^[9]. Karatnycky, also goes on to state how, using Freedom House’s reports, only one Islamic country in the world is considered free: Mali. Such evidence certainly does raise questions as to why so many Islamic countries, and those in the Middle East in particular, are not democratic. Conversely however, one must consider other Muslim countries such as Turkey and Malaysia, both of whom have acquired a degree of political freedom and democracy, as well as the Muslims who are successfully integrated the world over, in democratic regimes. This is not to say that Islam is not a barrier in the way of democracy. There is much in the teachings of more ‘conservative’ strands of Islam which can lead to a more restricted notion of the individual, for example in places such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia where women are considered a ‘second’ class, as well as property and minority rights, all of which are difficult to reconcile with contemporary versions of liberal capitalist democracy (Hinnebusch, 2006)^[10]. Furthermore, some Islamic traditions can lead to a propensity to accept authoritarian leadership, as is common in the region, as long as it is seen to be collective, but perhaps, however, it should instead be stated that although Islam may act as a hindrance to democracy in some areas, it is not the primary factor.

Looking elsewhere for the major challenge to democracy, one could propose the alternative argument, which is that it is the culture and practices of ‘Arabs’, and not Muslims, which prevent or limit democracy. Taking Middle Eastern countries GDP relative to the rest of the world, it can be stated that 16 Arab countries “underachieve” in terms of holding complete elections, compared to what other countries within a similar GDP range, experience. This is comparable to the 31 countries which are predominantly Muslim, but not Arab, who are said to “greatly overachieve” (Stephan et al. 2003)^[11]. It is worth acknowledging at this stage, that electoral competitiveness does not necessarily equal democracy; indeed arguably some countries have competitive elections, but then poor human rights records, for example Turkey. However, this link does suggest that Arabs must have some factor which makes them ‘underachieve’, if Islam isn’t always a barrier for democracy.

One possible explanation could be the traditions, cultures and colonial legacy associated with Arabs in the Middle East. For example, in many parts of the region there is a belief in the traditional ‘small group’ loyalties, instead of large, catch all parties, derived from old traditions linked to tribalism, which used to be prevalent in the region. This division amongst so many “tribal” lines for much of the population makes it considerably harder to construct a broad based civil society and strong political parties (Hinnebusch, 2006)^[12] which are key elements of liberal democratic systems. Moreover, the Middle East can, to a degree, be considered a largely artificial construct, with state boundaries drawn with little disregard to the differences of the people within, resulting in factions within populations unable to identify with the state- a factor needed for any stable democracy.

It is this “cultural exceptionalism”, argues Hinnebusch, which has “short circuited” the natural linear progression from development to democracy; as derived from ‘modernization theory’. Using this theory, it is projected that as Middle Eastern states cross certain thresholds in terms of economic development, the resulting changes, such as increased education and literacy, as well as a widening of the middle classes, will result in an increase in democracy, as authoritarian regimes will be unable to govern the socially mobilized and too complex society. This however, has not happened. Whilst it is recognised that models such as modernization theory have their flaws, it can also be suggested that Middle Eastern countries do not follow these projected trends, not only because they are culturally different from the other countries upon which the model was based, but also because it can be argued that many Middle Eastern countries do not actually exceed the economic thresholds required for the advancement of democracy. This is because many states in the Middle East derive much of their income via external rent, garnered from their oil sales, which do not raise social mobility to the level required by modernization theory to overcome authoritarian regimes. (Hinnebusch, 2006)

It can also be argued the presence of large reserves of oil in the Middle East *directly* hinders the development of democracy in the region. This is because states are able to embark on large public expenditure programmes which, although often come at a cost of little or no taxation to the citizens (Mahdavy, year unreferenceed, cited by Yates,

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2006)^[13], are aimed at relieving social pressures which would otherwise lead to demands of greater accountability for authoritarian governments (Ross, 2001)^[14]. Moreover, when citizens are not getting taxed, they are arguably less inclined to demand accountability from their governments. Indeed, research by Crystal (1990, cited by Ross, 2001) found that the discovery of oil in Kuwait and Qatar made the governments less accountable to the merchant class. It is therefore possible to say that oil certainly could be another factor that limits democracy in the Middle East.

Since the start of 2011, however, movements and protests have formed in different states all around the Middle East, arguing for democracy; leaving many states in turmoil.

Protests first began in Tunisia but similar protests soon rose in Yemen, Jordan, and Egypt, with many other Middle Eastern also forming protests, if to a lesser degree. Although many of these protests are still continuing today, it can be said that the outcomes of these protests, to date, have paved the way for greater democracy in much of the region. For example, both the Tunisian President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled for thirty years, have stepped down, paving the way for free and fair elections within a year for the people of Egypt, and a much greater degree of freedom and rights for the citizens of Tunisia, with caretaker president Mebazaa announcing that he would sign international agreements on protection of rights for citizens. Democratic developments also appear to be developing in Yemen, Sudan and Iraq, with the leaders there all standing down after serving their remaining term in office. However, there are many monarchies in the Middle East which have yet to make any real democratic concessions to protesters. In Morocco King Mohammed announced that he would soon make “deep” reforms, (Aljazeera, 2011)^[15] and Kings Hamad and Abdullah II, of Bahrain and Jordan respectively, have dismissed cabinets, however these reforms appear to be rather superficial, and not truly leading the way to any greater democracy.

On the other hand however, not only are Middle Eastern countries attempting to increase their democratic development by themselves, but other countries are, in an unprecedented move, announcing their support of the protests, particularly in Libya, where President Obama has publicly announced that Colonel Ghaddafi should step down. Such support from other countries is surprising, as despite America’s push for democracy around the world, the United States has always preferred stability in the Middle East to democracy, perhaps because, in the words of President Clinton’s former Secretary of State Madalaine Albright, (2002, cited by Fawcett, 2009)^[16] “Arab public opinion can be, after all, rather scary.” Speculatory reasoning aside, the point remains valid, and it can only be concluded that having once hesitant countries endorse the protests in the region, will perhaps improve the success of democracy in the Middle East.

Analysing the prospects of democracy in the Middle East at this given time is an incredibly difficult task. One should be wary of generalising the current protests and the reforms they bring, most of which appear rather tentative in nature, but at the same time, there is a definite desire to shift towards democracy by many citizens, arguing that perhaps, democracy isn’t such an alien concept to Muslims after all. Moreover, it can also be concluded that whilst many of the monarchies in the region seem unwilling to cede power entirely to more democratic institutions, there has been a push for constitutional monarchies- surely a step in the right direction in terms of democracy- and with pressure coming from the international community, it may be said that if democracy is ever going to develop in the region, now is the time it will happen.

^[1] Hanafi H (1998) *Primary reflections on the fourth Nordic conference on Middle Eastern studies*. <http://www.smi.uib.no/pao/hanafi.html> [14/03/11]

^[2] Carothers (2002) ‘The end of the transition Paradigm’ *Journal of Democracy* 13 (1)

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^[4] Karantnycky (2002) ‘Muslim countries and the democracy gap’ *Journal of Democracy* 13 (1)

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^[5] Huntington (2002) '*The clash of civilisations and the remaking of world order*' Free Press; London

^[6] Stephan et al (2003) 'An 'arab' more than 'muslim' electoral gap' *Journal of Democracy* 14 (3)

^[7] Freedom House (2010) *Press Release: Freedom in the world 2010*. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=1120> [15/03/11]

^[8] Norton (2009) *International relations of the middle east*; Oxford University Press, Oxford

^[9] Karantnycky (2002) 'Muslim countries and the democracy gap' *Journal of Democracy* 13 (1)

^[10] Hinnebusch (2006) 'Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the middle east; and overview and critique.' *Democratization* 3 (3)

^[11] Stephan et al (2003) 'An 'arab' more than 'muslim' electoral gap' *Journal of Democracy* 14 (3)

^[12] Hinnebusch (2006) 'Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the middle east; and overview and critique.' *Democratization* 3 (3)

^[13] Yates D (1996) '*The rentier state in Africa: Oil rent dependency and neo-colonialism in the republic of Gabon.*' New Jersey; Africa World Press

^[14] Ross M (2001) 'Does oil hinder democracy?' *World Politics*, 53

^[15] Aljazeera, Inside Story (2011) *Too little, too late?* <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/insidestory/> [10/03/2011]

^[16] Fawcett (2009) *International Relations of the Middle East*; Oxford University Press, Oxford.

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