



PERSPECTIVES

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The Failure of Democracy in the Arab World

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ever since 9/11, Western leaders have pushed for democratization of the Arab world. Almost twenty years down the road, the push for democratization has had catastrophic results: With the partial exception of Tunisia, the Arab states whose dictators were toppled are mired in strife or have relapsed into despotism. The time has come to learn from the experiences of South Korea, Spain, and Chile in the mid-to-late 20th century and realize that without a growing economy and a sizable middle class, democracy cannot take root in society.

Western ambitions of planting democracy in the Arab world have failed miserably. Be it after foreign military interventions in Iraq and Libya or after civilian protests in Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia, the toppling of dictators has hardly given birth to stable liberal democracies, with the respective Arab states sinking into greater strife and barbarism.

This failure was perhaps unavoidable. Liberal democracy is not a panacea for social and economic problems. Nor can democracy thrive in extremely challenging social and economic conditions. The belief that the successful democratization of post-World War II Germany and Japan could be replicated in the Arab world ignored the fact that democratization in Yugoslavia paved the way to civil war and ethnic cleansing. Because Arab countries are far more similar to Yugoslavia than they are to postwar Germany and Japan, it was foreseeable that democratization in that part of the world would aggravate social and ethnic tensions rather than heal them.

Liberal democracy flourishes best in strong economies with a sizable middle class, and is held hostage by internal schisms. In the Arab world, those elements work against the success of democracy. The Arab states are often riven by linguistic, ethnic, social, and religious cleavages. Their economies are often dependent on

natural resources, and the absence of a diversified economy hinders the emergence of a resilient bourgeoisie – the backbone of civil society and liberal democracy. Without these elements, attempts at democratization in the Arab world have fomented rather than inhibited political and religious extremism, social sectarianism, corruption and nepotism, terrorism, and repression.

Western leaders must understand that just as during the Cold War, when authoritarian governments promoting capitalism were often the most reliable allies against Communism, the best allies against Islamism may prove to be autocrats promoting capitalism. The time is ripe to ensure that President Sisi in Egypt, King Muhammad VI in Morocco, and President Bouteflika in Algeria receive the economic aid and advice needed to smooth the transition towards genuine free-market economies that will unleash domestic economic growth.

This Western assistance must be complemented by a drastic reduction in non-essential military aid and must be predicated on a strict supervision of economic policies. Generous assistance needs to foster sustainable economic growth, not subsidize the inefficient institutions and patronage networks that characterize the region. The ultimate goal must be to prepare the Arab states for democratization after an extended period of rapid economic growth – not to prop up autocrats indefinitely.

The West needs to condition its tolerance and support for Arab autocrats on the pursuit of intelligent economic policies. Only such policies can provide the economic growth and jobs needed to absorb a rapidly growing labor force and reduce the social tensions that make Islamism attractive to the young and unemployed.

Islamism, like Communism, cannot be defeated by poor democracies. It can only be defeated by prosperous democracies. The economic success stories of Spain, Chile, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea suggest that autocracies can deliver economic reforms and economic growth at least as well as liberal democracies. Given that the Arab world currently lacks virtually all the historical, cultural, economic, and social prerequisites needed for liberal democracy to take root, encouraging economic reforms and rapid economic growth unhindered by partisan feuds may be the most sober strategy with which to tackle the region's many problems.

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