

The State of Freedom in the Arab World Five Years after the First Arab Human Development Report

Panorama

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Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) (2002-2005)

The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), at least in the first cycle of four reports (2002-2005), has aspired to rise to the role of conscience and vanguard in the Arab intellectual arena, championing the causes of knowledge, freedom and good governance, and the empowerment of women. These issues were rarely raised with any force in the development discourse in the region or about the region.

The AHDR has succeeded, in my opinion, in elevating the development discourse in the Arab region from the base world of dollars, bricks, and trade to the lofty plane of human dignity, spanning knowledge, freedom and good governance, and the empowerment of women.

However, it is fair to acknowledge that the intellectual stimulation did not last for very long and was not translated into effective strategies and programmes for human development as envisaged by the AHDR. Under the weight of authoritarian governance regimes and stagnant opposition politics, caused in part by the “treason of intellectual and political elites” and aided by savage globalisation, not to mention imperialistic projects in the Middle East, the development discourse and practice settled back to dollars, bricks, and trade, and perhaps a spot of tourism for the wealthy.

Hence, it is perhaps fair to claim that the development crisis, from the human development perspective, in the Arab region has intensified rather than ameliorated in the past five years.

It was maintained in the analysis of the AHDRs that the most binding constraints on human development in the Arab region are restriction of freedom and

bad governance. Hence, attainment of freedom, in the comprehensive sense adopted in the AHDR, was recognized as the most crucial human development challenge in the Arab region.

In fact, starting with the third AHDR, human development was defined as synonymous with freedom, in a comprehensive sense, elaborated therein.

In this article, the course of freedom and good governance over the past five years will be taken as the yardstick to monitor change in human development in the Arab region over that period.

To fix ideas through concrete evidence, reference will be made to the important case of Egypt being a pivotal country in the region.

Freedom, the AHDR Concept

Freedom is taken here in the comprehensive sense of “eradication of all forms of curtailment of human dignity.”

This comprehensive sense not only incorporates civil and political freedoms (in other words, liberation from oppression) but also adds to them the imperative that the individual be liberated from all means by which human dignity may be curtailed, such as hunger, disease, ignorance, poverty, fear and, above all, injustice.

Furthermore, an individual can only be free in a free society. Societal freedom operates on two dimensions, the first being the protection of freedoms of subgroups and subcultures –terms that I prefer to the current category, “minorities.”

In addition, according to this concept of freedom, national liberation and self-determination are perceived as essential components of freedom, especially in the Arab nations, where infringement of national liberation is conspicuous.

Operationally, respect of freedom thus defined can

be embodied in the strict adherence to the entire body of the international human rights law, which should take precedence over national legislation.

Freedom is one of those superior human culmination outcomes that require the presence of societal structures and processes

In this sense, freedom is synonymous with human development and is perhaps the quintessential public good demanded in less-developed countries. Freedom is, however, one of those superior human culmination outcomes that require the presence of societal structures and processes that will attain and safeguard it, ensuring its uninterrupted continuance and promotion. These societal structures and processes guaranteeing freedom are summed up in the good governance regime, embodied in synergy between the state (comprising the government, elected representative councils, and the judiciary), civil society, and the business sector, all run respecting the principles of rational public administration. This good governance regime is founded on the following axes:

1. Total respect of freedom in the comprehensive sense and especially the key freedoms of opinion, expression, and association (assembly and organisation in both civil and political society) in harmony with the international human rights law.
2. Governance strictly based on institutions and on the separation of powers.
3. Full representation of the people in governance institutions.
4. Institutions that work efficiently and with total transparency.
5. Institutions subject to effective inter-accountability based on the separation of powers and direct accountability before the people via periodical, open, free, and fair elections.
6. Application of the law to all without exception in a form that is fair and protective of human rights.
7. A competent, honest, and totally independent judiciary to oversee the application of the law.

This model of good governance then ensures both freedom and justice. Since justice is the paramount value in Islam, this concept of freedom, incorporat-

ing justice, and the associated model of good governance would be inherently suitable for predominantly Muslim societies such as the Arab countries.

The State of Freedom in Arab Countries Five Years after the First AHDR

Restriction of Key Freedoms

The key freedoms of opinion, expression, and association (the right to peaceful assembly and the right to organize freely in civil and political society) are severely constrained in almost all Arab countries, precluding the potential for good governance (representative, institutional, and accountable under strict rule of law and completely independent judiciary). This malaise is prevalent to the extent that Arab culture itself has been blamed for the presence of authoritarian rule.

Though we do not subscribe to this Arab-Muslim exception, we must admit that reactionary interpretations of Islam have thrived on authoritarian rule in Arab countries.

Restriction of key freedoms that normally coexists with centralized authoritarian rule filters down to the fabric of Arab societies.

Unfortunately, the trend in Arab countries at large has not been towards expansion of key freedoms of late. Arab countries, in fact, exhibit exactly the opposite trend, showing a clear tendency towards further restricting key freedoms in the last few years.

Foreign Occupations

National liberation and self-determination are essential components of freedom, especially in the Arab region, where infringement of national freedom is conspicuous.

Violation of freedom on the national level destroys individual freedom and human dignity, clearly manifest in the sinister occupations of Palestine and Iraq.

Iraq

In Iraq, the huge and rising human costs of occupation became clear in the context of growing lawlessness, internal conflict, and undue concern for an apparently flawed political process.

In spite of claims to the contrary by the US administration and its client regime in Baghdad, the country

has been destroyed, its resources have been plundered, and human suffering has reached gigantic proportions. In particular, for the nearly six million Iraqi displaced and refugees, many of whom are women and children, the “liberation” of Iraq by the Bush administration has meant nothing but untold misery.

The great challenges for the Iraqi people remain the reform of the constitution in order to guarantee the territorial integrity of Iraq, the rebuilding of state institutions, the protection of human rights, the achievement of national reconciliation, and the elimination of anarchy and corruption in a unified country free from foreign occupation and terrorism.

Palestine

Palestine is the exemplary case in the world today of violation of national liberty undermining the freedom of the individual citizen. The occupation of Palestine has surely compromised the human dignity of all Palestinians.

With repeated incursions of the occupation forces committing war crimes and crimes against humanity, a lack of territorial integrity of the territories under the fragile and corrupt Palestinian Authority, and the barbaric siege of the Gaza Strip, human suffering has reached epic proportions.

At the time of writing, the Gaza “holocaust” was raging on. After two weeks of hugely unequal war by the vastly superior Israeli military machine, the densely populated Gaza Strip was left devastated and nearly five thousand Palestinians were left dead or injured, half of them women, children, and elderly persons. The holocaust description is not a mere aphorism in this case, as evidence accumulated that the Israeli armed forces used internationally-banned weapons, including chemical ammunition such as white phosphorus warheads, which literally incinerate all living creatures that fall victim to them. All these abominable weapons are products of the American evil genius and its unfair and unconditional support of the Zionist project in the Arab region in clear contravention of international law.

The Case of Egypt

Why Egypt?

Egypt has at least one quarter of the population of the Arab region. Hence, numerically it is a prominent case.

More importantly, however, Egypt has traditionally exhibited a demonstration effect on the entire region. Events in Egypt, good or bad, seem to have been copied in other Arab countries, normally with a time lag.

Therefore, many Arabs express the belief, right or wrong, that reform in Egypt will inevitably lead to reform throughout the Arab region. One may infer that the opposite also applies.

Egypt is for these reasons a prominent case study.

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Egypt, a Brief Profile

Long recognized as the heart and pioneer of the Arab and Islamic worlds, Egypt has recently witnessed a change of fortunes.

As a regional power, the Egyptian state seems to have opted for dependence on, even subservience to, dominant powers in the world and the region, namely the US and even Israel, in the hopes of support and protection. Hence, its regional leadership role has been eroded recently and overtaken by oil-rich Saudi Arabia and even relative upstarts such as Qatar, not to mention the two relatively large regional Islamic powers: Turkey and Iran.

On the internal front, with a population of more than 70 million, and in spite of the ruling authoritarian regime boasting a successful economic reform program, economic misery has been mounting for the ordinary masses. Unemployment has been on the rise, poverty has been mounting, and inequality in the distribution of income and wealth has been intensifying.

The youth, a great majority of the population, have been subjected to a heavier dose of this economic misery.

To add insult to injury, the ruling authoritarian regime has adopted a strategy of increasingly restricting basic freedoms.

Blocking the Benign Path to Reform

According to the third AHDR, the benign path to reform in Arab countries starts with an opening act

that liberates civil society, in the extended sense, through total respect of the key freedoms of opinion, expression, and association (freedom to assemble peacefully and organize in civil and political society), the latter being the most consequential prerequisite of a vigorous and vibrant civil society.

Freedom of association is perhaps the essence of democratic reform. In the Arab region, freedom and good governance are goals to be attained through a precarious process of societal reform, and the threat of a "one-time election" is ever-present. Under these conditions, freedom of association is needed to guarantee a benign path to reform on one hand and to ensure that any majority that comes to power through elections will not undermine, or even annul, democratic processes.

The catch is that present authoritarian governance regimes are in fact the gatekeepers to the legal and institutional reforms required to ensure respect of these three key freedoms.

In reality, developments in the last five years have not given credence to the ruling authoritarian regimes reforming from within and ushering in the legal and institutional reforms required to ensure respect of the three key freedoms.

On the contrary, the authoritarian regime has shown the resolve to stay in power even if it means the destruction of the country. To attain this illusive goal, the authoritarian regime has been doing exactly the opposite. Legal and institutional changes and wrongly labelled "reforms" were introduced to restrict key freedoms even further. In fact, the ruling authoritarian regime in Egypt introduced constitutional amendments that embedded restrictions of freedom in the heart of the supreme legal document, the constitution. When a slim, carefully manipulated margin of freedom of expression is allowed, the freedom of association is kept severely rationed and subject to regime control. A heavy dose of managed media brainwashing and brutal police repression is then administered to quell popular discontent.

We need to keep in mind that this regime has also failed miserably in the arena of development, inflicting untold miseries on citizens in the form of widespread unemployment, increasing poverty, and worsening distribution of income and wealth in an environment of rampant corruption leading to escalating social polarization and political tension.

The authoritarian regime is seemingly convinced that this lethal combination will allow the continuation of the authoritarian regime forever.

The lesson of history is that they are dead wrong! It is akin to the frantic and violent movements of an already slaughtered chicken on its last breath.

Such acts of desperation might in fact be the death knoll for these regimes.

People can be wronged for some time but they cannot be wronged forever.

As these regimes continue to produce appalling injustices through impoverishment and repression while blocking peaceful and effective political channels to address them, they inevitably invite protest behaviour.

Protest Movements

The extent and tempo of protest movements in Egypt of late has laid to rest traditional wisdom about the passivity of Egyptians.

One estimate puts the number of protest movements during 2007 alone at nearly 1,000, comprising 400 workers strikes and slow downs. Even government employees have participated in labour unrest, a development that would have been considered inconceivable a few months ago. In one famous government employee strike, thousands of men, women, and children from government departments throughout the country camped behind the Prime Minister's office for weeks on end in the middle of winter. That movement was crowned by the declaration of the first labour union independent of regime control, a historical first! It is of little wonder that the pace of protest movements in Egypt has taken all observers and students of society and politics by storm.

What is the explanation?

The lethal combination contrived by authoritarian governance regimes to prolong their control over societies has finally worked against them.

The injustice levied by impoverishment and repression has reached a breaking point where the oppressed can stand to lose only their misery and collective protest becomes the only path of expression open to them because the political regime does not provide channels to address these injustices effectively.

Authoritarian governance regimes could have committed suicide by devising this brutal and fundamentally inhumane strategy.

The success rate of protest movements has been admirable. Another crucial demonstration effect!

True, many of these movements adopted union, social, or economic demands.

But these goals are political in essence and the socio-political separation is spurious. Furthermore, what

starts as “social” easily becomes “political” through the accumulation of quantitative change turning into a qualitative transformation, as the recent experience of Latin America clearly shows!

Could Protest Movements Become the Vehicle of Reform?

Probably, yes.

However, to understand the contention fully, a few points of detail add insight.

Protest movements have yielded a new breed of leaders on the ground, struggle-hardened, confident, and with progressive social and political visions and agendas.

An especially welcome development is the appearance of a new breed of women protest leaders, another progressive move considered unthinkable in Egypt a few months ago.

In fact, this protest leadership is, in my opinion, far advanced on the path of political reform of the majority of intellectual and political elites in the country.

As a sign of the extensive state of discontent in the country beyond the circles of active protest, ordinary citizens in quarters where sit-ins were staged tended to embrace the protesters positively, and even the security forces brought in to restrain them if needed tended at times to show passive support, bordering on respect and admiration.

However, the authoritarian regime has of late tended to order police and even army troops to tackle the dirty tasks of enforcing a blockade of even potential protest movements using excessive force, as has happened recently with the landslide calamity in *Dweeka* in the heart of Cairo; plundering farmers' land for the benefit of investment projects of the ruling clique; stopping Palestinians under the grossly unfair blockade from fleeing Gaza to Egyptian soil seeking basic medicine and food stuffs; and preventing Egyptian civil society activists from providing aid to them.

This new tactic might work for some time. Nevertheless, it could only buy authoritarian regimes a little additional time, and can never stop the march of history. However, perhaps the most important premise for the protest movements as candidates for carriers of reform

is their tendency to coordinate and build bridges within the protest movement landscape and the country at large.

If the political and intellectual elites in opposition to the authoritarian regime exhibit the same tendencies while rising to the same level of strength and daring as the leaders of the protest movements, a credible alternative to the present authoritarian regime could coalesce, hopefully ushering in a historical transition towards a society of freedom and good governance. One especially important task that protest movements might not have the resources or the capacity to undertake is formulation of solid intellectual visions for change and reform.

The most important premise for the protest movements as candidates for carriers of reform is their tendency to coordinate and build bridges within the protest movement landscape

If elites can deliver on that front and build bridges with the mounting protest movements, the building blocks for the desired societal transformation leading to freedom and good governance could be put together.

Unfortunately, the ruling authoritarian regime seems to have opted for this disaster scenario.

Reacting to a series of recent rulings by the judiciary upholding civil and political liberties and holding the executive authority accountable for infringements on the public good, the regime has unleashed a fresh wave of heightened police brutality to block the implementation of these rulings.

The ruling clique is trying to block the peaceful path to a society of freedom and good governance, knowing full well that it will pay the heaviest price for this transformation in fair punishment for rampant corruption and repression.

The end result could be an epoch of disastrous infighting in the country, nonetheless leading to the fall of authoritarian rule, but at a very heavy price in human suffering.