

Political Transitions in the Arab World

Dina Shehata

Researcher

Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo

The year 2007 marked the end of a brief interval of political liberalization in the Arab world which began shortly after the occupation of Iraq and which resulted primarily from external pressures on Arab regimes to reform and democratize. External pressures during the 2003-2006 period created a political opening which activists across the region used to press for long-standing demands for political and constitutional reform. Faced with a combination of growing external and internal pressures to reform, Arab regimes were forced to make some concessions to their challengers.

In Egypt, upon the request of the President, Parliament passed a constitutional amendment to allow for direct competitive presidential elections. In September 2005, Egypt witnessed its first competitive presidential election ever and as expected Mubarak was elected for a fifth term with 87% of the vote. Moreover, during the November 2005 parliamentary elections, which were freer than previous elections, the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition movement in Egypt, won 88 seats. This was the largest number of seats won by an opposition group in Egypt since the 1952 revolution.

Similarly, in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, Hamas won a majority of the seats. Hamas was thereby able to establish control over the Palestinian Legislative Council which had been dominated by Fatah since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1996. In Lebanon, in the wake of the assassination of Rafiq Hariri on 14th February 2005, a coalition of pro-Hariri political forces was able through broad-based mass mobilization and external support to force Syrian troops to pull out from Lebanon and the pro-Syrian Government to resign. Elections

were held, and the 14th February coalition was able to win a plurality of the votes and to form a new government. In Morocco, King Mohamed VI oversaw the establishment of a truth and reconciliation committee which sought to address the grievances of those who had been abused under the reign of his father. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) also undertook some important reforms during the 2003-2006 period. In 2003 Qatar promulgated a written constitution for the first time in its history. In 2005, Saudi Arabia convened municipal elections for the first time in five decades. And in 2006, Bahrain held parliamentary elections in which the Shiite society of Al Wefaq won 40% of the seats. Subsequently, the first Shiite deputy prime minister in Bahrain was appointed. These events, which came to be known as 'the Arab Spring,' led some optimists to believe that the Arab world was on the brink of a democratic transformation similar to those experienced in Latin American and Eastern and Central Europe during the 1980s and 1990s. However, in 2007, as political liberalization gave way to heightened polarization and to renewed repression, these hopes were dispelled. The failure of the openings of the 2003-2006 period to create a sustained momentum towards democratization can be attributed to a number of factors. The deteriorating security situation in Iraq and the failure of the United States to create a stable and democratic regime dampened support for democracy promotion efforts within the American administration and reinforced the views of those who held that security and stability must come before democracy. Moreover, the electoral successes of Islamists in Egypt and in Palestine further dampened Western support for democracy promotion efforts in the region since the principals of these movements were perceived to be at odds with the interests of the West. Finally, the ascendancy of Iran as a regional power and the growing assertiveness of its allies in Lebanon, Palestine and Syria drove the Unit-

ed States to recommit to its alliances with “moderate” Arab regimes such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which were perceived as a bulwark against Iranian expansionism. As a result of these variables, strategic interests once again trumped the democracy promotion agenda for the region.

Thus strengthened, Arab regimes proceeded in 2007 to adopt a series of measures aimed at demobilizing their domestic challengers and at reasserting their hegemony over their political systems. Three phenomena in particular could be observed across the Arab world in 2007: the adoption of new laws aimed at reducing political contestation, increased political polarization between regimes and oppositions, and elections with very low levels of contestation and/or popular participation. In the following I examine in more detail each of these three phenomena.

Measures Aimed at Upgrading Authoritarianism and Reducing Contestation

In Egypt, Parliament passed 34 constitutional amendments, some of which were perceived as particularly damaging to the prospects for liberalization and democratization in Egypt. Article 5 of the constitution was amended to prevent Islamists from forming legally recognized political parties and from participating in the political process. Article 88 was amended to suspend judicial supervision over the electoral process and replace it with an electoral committee whose members are chosen by both houses of Parliament which have been dominated by the ruling party since 1952. Article 179 was amended to allow the President to refer civilians to military tribunals and to allow for the adoption of a new anti-terrorism bill which is widely expected to further constrain political rights and freedoms. In addition to these amendments, the Egyptian regime forcibly prevented candidates from the Muslim Brotherhood from contesting the 2007 elections of the Shura Council (the Upper House of Parliament) and the 2008 Municipal elections. Moreover, in 2008 leading Muslim Brotherhood activists who had been referred to military tribunals were given sentences of up to 10 years in prison.

In Jordan, the regime oversaw the adoption of two new laws which were perceived as detrimental to the process of liberalization. A new Political Parties Law which raised the minimum number of party members from 50 to 500 was passed. Under the new law, more than half of all Jordanian Political Parties will have

to be dissolved in 2008. A new Press Law was also adopted which significantly raises the fines for alleged press offences. Journalists accused of defaming religion, offending religious prophets, inciting sectarian strife or racism, slandering individuals and spreading false information or rumours could face fines of up to 40,000 USD.

In Morocco, a country widely perceived as the most liberal in the Arab world, the regime cracked down on the independent press and a numbers of newspaper editors and journalists from *Nichane*, *le Journal Hebdomadaire*, *Al Watan Al An* and *Telquel* were charged with fines and/or prison sentences. Moreover, the Moroccan government proposed a new press law which would criminalize journalists accused of offending the monarchy, Islam and state institutions such as the army and the judiciary.

Political Polarization

In 2007, a number of Arab countries were the scene of heightened social and political polarization which led in some cases to the outbreak of violent conflict and/or to a state of stalemate and political paralysis. Such was the case in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen and to a lesser extent in Bahrain and Kuwait. In Palestine, the conflict between Fatah and Hamas escalated in part as a result of the efforts of Fatah to strip the Hamas-dominated Palestinian Legislative Council of its powers. The struggle for power led to a violent confrontation between Hamas and Fatah which ended with a Hamas takeover of the Gaza strip and the breakdown of the Palestinian authority into two separate and competing entities.

In Lebanon, the failure of the Sunni-dominated pro-Hariri ruling coalition and the Shiite-dominated pro-Syrian coalition to reach an agreement over the new president left Lebanon without a president and led to a series of violent confrontations between the supporters of the two groups. In Yemen, the Salih regime was busy trying to quell a rebellion in Northern Yemen by the supporters of the Shiite cleric Al Houthi which had begun in 2005. The confrontation between the military and Al Houthi rebels led to hundreds of deaths and arrests and contributed to the expansion of the powers of the military establishment.

In Bahrain, the year 2007 saw a number of violent confrontations between the police and demonstrators in Shiite areas. In spite of important political gains made by the politically excluded Shiite majority in 2006,

2007 saw heightened confrontations with the regime. These confrontations were provoked in part by the leaking of a secret document which exposes attempts by the regime to foment anti-Shiite sentiment and to marginalize the Shiite majority. The regime responded to the riots by arresting hundreds of protesters and by cracking down on human rights activists. Kuwait also experienced in 2007 a state of political paralysis which resulted from a stand-off between parliament and the executive. Three consecutive cabinets had to resign in 2007 to avert a vote of no-confidence by parliament. The stand-off ended in 2008 with the dissolution of parliament by the emir.

The inability of the various competing factions to resolve their differences through peaceful and democratic means further reinforces sectarian strife in the region

The state of political and social polarization experienced by some of those countries that had made important democratic advances during the 2003-2006 period, dampened enthusiasm for the democratic process both inside those countries and elsewhere in the Arab world. Moreover, the inability of the various competing factions to resolve their differences through peaceful and democratic means further reinforces sectarian strife in the region, rendering the prospects for democratization more elusive.

Elections Without Participation

In 2007, a number of Arab countries namely Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Oman, Syria and Mauritania held presidential, municipal and/or parliamentary elections. Most of these elections were characterized by very low level of political contestation and very low voter turnout, even by the typically low Arab standards. Moreover, Islamists performed badly in most elections held in 2007 not only because of increased repression but also because of growing disappointment with their performance in many of the countries where they had been elected.

Algeria convened municipal and parliamentary elections in 2007. The parliamentary elections which were held on 17th May 2007 reproduced the dom-

inance of Algeria's ruling alliance – the National Liberation Front (FLN), the National Rally for Democracy (RND) and the Movement of Society for Peace (HMA) – which won 249 out of 389 seats. The Islah party, the largest opposition party, boycotted the election after its leader Abdullah Gaballah was stripped by the Ministry of Interior of his position as head of the party. The ruling alliance also won an overwhelming majority in the municipal elections which were held on the 30th May 2007. Voter turnout in both elections was low. Participation rates during the parliamentary elections were 35.5% compared with 46% during the 2002 elections.

Jordan also held municipal and parliamentary elections in 2007 which yielded similar results. The municipal elections which were held on 31st July were reportedly marred by widespread fraud, which drove the largest opposition party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), to withdraw its 25 candidates after the polls opened. The legislative elections which were held in November were won by pro-government independents. The IAF only won six seats, compared with the 17 seats it had won during the 2003 elections. Voter turnout was approximately 42%. The losses of Islamists were attributed not only to the widespread use of vote-buying but also to internal divisions within the moment between the moderate wing and the hard-liners.

Morocco held parliamentary elections in September 2007. And while these elections were largely considered free and fair by domestic and international observers, voter turnout was exceedingly low. Only 37% of eligible voters turned out for the election, compared with 52% during the 2002 elections. The Nationalist Istiqlal party won the largest number of seats and its leader was appointed prime minister. The Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), which was widely expected to win the largest number of seats, came in second place with 47 seats and was excluded from the coalition government.

Syria was another Arab country that held municipal and parliamentary elections and a presidential referendum in 2007. The National Progressive Front, a coalition which includes the Baath party and nine other smaller parties that have ruled Syria since 1972, won a majority of the seats in both the parliamentary elections held in April and the municipal elections in August. The remaining seats were won by independents. Syrian opposition groups boycotted both elections. The regime reported a voter turnout of 50%.

Some of the smaller Arab countries such as Qatar, Oman and Mauritania also held election in 2007. Qatar held municipal elections in April 2007. However, the first legislative elections, which were scheduled to occur in 2007, were postponed for the second time. Oman held a Shura council election on 27 October. The government estimated voter turnout at 63%, down from 74% in 2003. The Shura Council in Oman plays an advisory role and has no legislative powers. Finally, Mauritania held its first free presidential elections on 25 March which drew 70% of eligible voters.

With a few exceptions – namely Mauritania – elections in the Arab world in 2007 have failed to attract voters and served only to prolong the power of existing regimes and their allies. The absence of any real contestation has stripped elections of their significance and has discouraged voters from participating in a process whose results are predetermined. And where real contestation did exist as in Morocco, the inability of elected officials to affect the policy-making process in a political system characterized by the centralization of power in the office of the monarchy seems to have created disillusionment with the viability of the electoral process.

Some Positive Developments

Even though the state of political liberalization and democratization in the Arab world was largely bleak in 2007, there were nonetheless a few positive developments, mostly in the Gulf region. And while these developments cannot be said to contribute to democratization they nonetheless contribute to the modernization and institutionalization of politics in some of the more traditional polities in the Arab world. These developments include the creation of the Bay'a Council or the Succession Council in Saudi Arabia which seeks to formalize the process of electing a successor to the Monarch, and the modernization of the

Saudi judicial system through the codification of laws and the creation of an administrative court and an appeals court. Other positive developments include a new press law in the UAE, which abolishes prison sentences associated with publication crimes, and a new municipalities' law in Jordan which provides for the election of municipal councils and mayors, who were previously appointed. Finally, women's rights were reinforced by the appointment of 7 female ministers in the Moroccan cabinet and 4 female ministers in the UAE, and through the allocation of 20% of all municipal council seats to women in Jordan.

Conclusion

The year 2007 marked the end of a political opening which had begun in 2003 and which resulted primarily from external pressures on Arab regimes to democratize. In 2007, the Arab world experienced increased repression, political polarization and low levels of political participation. Such a shift away from the liberalizing trends of the 2003-2006 period was primarily the result of the changing priorities of external powers in the region, who began to fear the ascendancy of Iran and Islamist forces and who thus sought reinforce their alliances with authoritarian Arab regimes. However, increased repression, as the year 2007 illustrates, only serves to reinforce political polarization and apathy, creating a vicious cycle which undermines the prospects for peaceful democratization in the Arab world.

References

Arab Reform Bulletin, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007 issues.
Al Sharq Al Awsat, 2007 issues.
www.islamonline.net
www.bbcarabic.com