

Political Governance and Reform in the Middle East

by Sean Carberry

There is no lack of consensus on the reforms needed in the Arab world. Reports by institutions, task forces, think tanks, and academics in the Arab world and the West converge on the same problem areas in Arab countries: freedom and civil rights, rule of law, the role of women in society, education, executive control of legislative and judicial branches, lack of accountability and transparency in government, and the persistence of autocratic regimes. Most reports make the same broad recommendations for reforms: eliminate emergency laws, enact universal suffrage, allow for political parties, enact constitutional reforms guaranteeing freedoms, develop civil society and a free press, establish independent branches of government, increase political participation of women, and encourage economic liberalization.

Despite global attention to the issue, reforms in the region have been so slow to materialize. There seemed to be an “Arab Spring” in bloom through much of 2004 and 2005 that brought elections in Iraq, free and fair Palestinian elections, “open” parliamentary and presidential elections in Egypt, protests in Lebanon that led to Syria’s withdrawal and a democratic movement in Beirut, Saudi municipal elections, Jordan’s National Agenda for Reform, and a general wave of reformist sentiment across the region. Today, there is little of substance to show for all the energy spent on these reforms, and in some cases, the reform process seems to have taken steps backwards.

In order to move beyond reports and rhetoric to results, it is essential for Arab leaders, reformers, and people in the region to develop a deeper understanding of the issues that are fueling domestic and international demands for reform, as well as the internal barriers to reform (some of which, it should be noted, are simultaneously drivers of reform). The focus on democratization and large scale reforms has led to paralysis. The large scope of the reform agenda has prevented its implementation. It is time to move the debate to a perspective closer to the ground and move towards improving governance.

Drivers of and Barriers to Reform

While each country in the Middle East faces specific internal issues, there are clear trends that confront all nations. Unemployment, demographic pressures, educational deficiencies, structural economic challenges, and centralized, often corrupt rule have all driven people to seek reform. The lack of substantive reform is not a function of lack of desire or will. The power of ruling regimes, the focus on democratization rather than governance, the misinterpretation of the growing strength of Islamists, the policies of external players like the United States, and the lack of sustained leadership for change all create substantial barriers to reform.

Jobs, Demographics, and Education

In the democratic societies in the West, the principle driving force in elections is usually the economy. When people are uncertain about their economic future, when they do not have jobs or fear losing their jobs, they vote for political change. This motivation for change is no different in

the Middle East, and even the most cursory analysis of economic trends in the Middle East shows deep-seated structural problems, particularly with regard to employment.

In 2005, the region had the world's second highest unemployment rate at 13.2 percent, and unemployment among people between the ages of 15 and 24 was nearly twice as high. Given the demographics of the region, there is little hope that unemployment outcomes will change soon. The number of people under the age of 25 in the Middle East is large and growing rapidly. In Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, the percentage of the population under 25 is 54 percent, 57 percent, and 56 percent respectively. In contrast, only 35 percent of the US population is below the age of 25, and globally the number is 46 percent. Various analyses estimate that as youth enter the regional labor market, the region will need to create 80 to 100 million new jobs in the next two decades to absorb them and reduce unemployment to structurally sustainable levels.

The Middle East faces an additional challenge in regard to education. The region has invested heavily in education in recent decades. As a result, young workers are increasingly educated and have rising expectations in terms of wages and job quality. However, educational output in the Middle East, in terms of worker skills, is falling short of the needs of employers. As a result employers often import workers with the skills they need, leaving nationals unemployed and subject to radical influences.

The Iron Fist and the Greased Palm

In addition to economic, demographic, and educational pressures, citizens in the region are increasingly dissatisfied with what they perceive as inefficient and repressive ruling regimes. Basic freedoms are lacking, security forces suppress free speech, assembly, and dissent, and there is little transparency or accountability in government. It is common for the executive to control the legislature and the judiciary through various legal, institutional, and coercive means. Numerous countries prohibit the formation of political parties; others maintain restrictions that make it either impossible to effectively form parties or prevent them from gaining any strength.

The lack of transparency and accountability has allowed corruption to flourish. According to the 2005 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are the least corrupt Arab states—scoring 6.3 and 6.2 out of 10 respectively (ten being the best, or least corrupt). Oman was tied for 28th out of 159 countries surveyed, and the UAE was 30th. Qatar, Bahrain, and Jordan all scored slightly over 5, and the rest of the Arab countries scored below. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria tied with four other countries at 70th, in the ranking, with a score of 3.4. Algeria scored 2.8, and Yemen scored 2.7.

The American Elephant in the Room

Any discussion of the reform currents in the region must address US policies in the region. The Bush Administration continues with its exhortations for democracy, but its involvement in Iraq, current standoffs with Iran and Hamas, its reaction to Israeli incursions into Lebanon, and its history in the region all promote varying degrees of backlash and anger directed at the US and governments that cooperate with it. Furthermore, many people in the region view America's campaign in Iraq as an illegal occupation, and view the US as complicit with what they see as Israel's illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories.

The results of the American effort to democratize the region so far have not been positive. In particular, the notion that toppling Saddam Hussein would quickly lead to the growth of

democracy in Iraq and a wave of democratic reform in the region has proven naïve at best, and counterproductive at worst. The resultant anti-US bias in the region has weakened the legitimacy of agents for change that have ties to the US. This is unfortunate as there are US organizations that can offer expertise and assistance, but they are tainted by reaction to US foreign policies—policies that are not likely to change dramatically in the near future.

The False Choice: The Status Quo vs. the Islamists

There is one thing the United States and many in the international community want less than the current status quo: a rise of Islamist regimes in the Middle East. For all the faults of current regimes, the US can tolerate them if they cooperate on security matters and maintain regional stability. This empowers autocrats in the region. By eviscerating secular opposition parties and subtly propping up Islamists, they have presented the West with a choice: either us or the Islamists. This has proven to be an effective tactic to fend off reform.

This is a false choice, as the growing popularity of Islamist parties is not an indication of a rise in Islamist sentiment in general. The mood is more “Anybody but...” Hamas won the Palestinian elections not because of their Islamist agenda but largely because they were not Fatah. Islamist parties (even militant ones) have been able to develop civil society infrastructure using a pre-existing foundation of mosques and a general community presence. In contrast, secular opposition groups have no such networks, and it is easier for governments to disrupt their activities. Islamist movements have become increasingly adept at focusing on community services and other activities that endear them to people. As a result, people support them, and regimes fear them.

Looking for a Leader

Another challenge in the region, and an obstacle to reform, is the lack of a strong, sustained driving force of reform. South Africa had Nelson Mandela, Poland had Lech Walesa, and the United States had George Washington and other leaders. In the Middle East, there have been some leaders, such as Ayman Nour in Egypt, who have been able to galvanize public support. Nour, however, is currently in jail as a result of his opposition leadership—it remains to be seen if people around the world will rally to his cause. Egypt’s *Kifaya* movement has shown some promise in uniting various parties to fight for change, but in the last six months, government crackdowns have largely killed the movement’s momentum.

So far there is no unifying force across the region sustaining the movement for reform. Instead, individuals, parties, and movements in the region rise and fall with the tides of oil revenues and economic cycles. Without a strong charismatic leader or an organized, focused institutional movement that can persist in the face of entrenched opposition, it will be impossible to maintain momentum and the internal pressure for reform.

Giving the People What They Want

Right now, the cry in the streets of the region is generally not for representative, participatory democracy. What the public does seem to be calling for is transparent, accountable, effective governance that provides for the common good and treats all people with dignity. Countless residents of the region would be happy to go through life never casting a vote, so long as they have jobs, access to efficient public services, freedom from oppression by the state, and economic stability. This view is reinforced by the response to the 2005 Attitudes of Arabs

survey. When asked to indicate the importance of issues facing their own countries, people responded clearly that basic economic and domestic concerns trump issues of democracy and political reform:

Relative Importance of Issues Facing Arab Countries

Results from the Attitudes of Arabs Survey, 2005

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| 1) Expanding employment opportunities | 7) Resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict |
| 2) Improving the health care system | 8) Advancing democracy |
| 3) Ending corruption and nepotism | 9) Political government reform |
| 4) Improving the educational system | 10) Increasing the rights of women |
| 5) Combating extremism and terrorism | 11) Lack of political debate on important issues |
| 6) Protecting personal and civil rights | |

If there is no strong constituency calling for and willing to support democracy, the policies of democratization would seem to face tremendous challenges. In addition, the word *democracy* is becoming both a lightning rod and a cliché. The debate is so deeply ingrained at this point that it is rare to find a voice questioning the premise rather than the tactics. Given the barriers to reform and the lack of a public movement for democracy, perhaps the more appropriate approach is to focus on issues of governance that will make an immediate difference in the lives of people in Arab countries. That requires reforming bureaucracy, developing civil society, liberalizing the economy, expanding basic rights and freedoms, and building constituencies.

A Regional Roadmap Based on Realistic Metrics

From a macro perspective, the reforms proposed in Arab Human Development Reports and countless other reports on reform are appropriate. The region should consider democratization a long-term goal that involves taking incremental steps today to build the foundations for the eventual democracies of tomorrow. The region does need to guarantee rights and freedoms and open up the political process. Governments need to follow the rule of law, establish independent branches, empower women, and liberalize economies. These are essential reforms for long-term stability in a globalizing world. In the past it was possible to keep a population isolated and ignorant of the rest of the world, but in the age of satellite TV and the Internet, people are increasingly able to access information about other countries, other ways of life, and the shortcomings of their own governments.

But these are high-level reforms so large in scope substantive changes would involve transforming decades, and in some cases centuries, worth of entrenched political, cultural, and social systems. That kind of change takes time, persistence, and patience. The critical strategy is to build a bridge to that future through small-scale, incremental, and attainable reforms. To build this bridge, Arab countries and people of the Middle East need to take ownership of the reform process. Right now, many reforms are viewed as (and probably are) reactionary in nature. Any reform strategy that involves externally implemented, top-down reforms is unlikely to lead to sustainable results. Legitimacy comes from within. Governments and reformers must become proactive and change their attitude from “reform because it is being forced upon us,” to “reform out of the interest of our people, our stability, and our future - reform because it is good for *us*.”

Specifically, regional governments and actors need to establish appropriate, locally-defined reform metrics, laying out a course for *evolutionary* change. Arab governments must learn lessons from both successes and failures in the reform process, and establish “best practices” for reform. Countries should enact bureaucratic reforms to improve the quality of the public’s daily

interactions with government. Two of the most critical and difficult tasks will be to end the cycle of corruption and invest in educational reforms. These are massive undertakings that will, in and of themselves, require incremental steps, but which must be initiated now.

Another important lesson is to learn from the success of Islamist organizations. The Muslim Brotherhood and related organizations are gaining strength because of their local services, civic activities, and opposition to US policies. They are not gaining strength on a platform of restoring the Caliphate. Governments and secular reformers need to review the actions of these groups and learn from their practices. By improving basic services such as education and healthcare, governments can reclaim credibility, and undercut the influence of Islamist parties.

In addition, reformers need to establish strategic partnerships with outside actors—NGOs, private businesses, even external government agencies—that can provide regionally-tailored assistance. Organizations such as the Center for International Private Enterprise, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Freedom House, and even the Carter Center all undertake initiatives to improve governance and support reform in the Middle East. Regional governments should more directly partner with such organizations to leverage their capacities.

It will be essential to take steps to open up economies to trade and foreign investment. The carrots of trade relations and WTO membership should serve as a strong incentive to implement economic and political reforms. This is critical for oil-producing as much as non oil-producing states, as oil revenues will eventually decline and oil-producing states will increasingly have to diversify their economies.

Conclusion

Political governance and reform in the Middle East is going to remain a priority issue inside and outside the region. The process will be long, slow, contentious, and uneven. In the long run, success will depend largely on the ability of the people of the region to build and sustain momentum for change. Outside pressure will not relent, but it is critical for regional governments and reformers to define the process on their own terms.

It is not hard to outline the challenges in the region and identify the needed reforms; the difficulty is in charting a course. By moving away from a discussion based purely on democratization and instead looking at governance, it is possible to outline small steps that governments and reformers can take now. Improving bureaucratic functions and the delivery of services, investing in education, taking steps to reign in corruption, learning from past successes and failures, establishing partnerships inside and outside the region, and opening economies are all reforms that can be initiated today.

Only the people of the Middle East can generate lasting, credible change. This will require patience on their part as well as from the global community. This also will require courage and leadership. Right now the obstacles are many, the helping hands are few, and the path is uncertain. But, in the course of human history, the most important causes have been the most difficult and have required the greatest commitment. Political governance and reform in the Middle East is such a cause, and the world is waiting to see if the people of the region are ready to make the commitment.

Sean Carberry was a Summer Intern at the Dubai School of Government in 2006 and is a recent graduate of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.