

# PROGRESS & RETROGRESSION

*IN ARAB DEMOCRATIZATION*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**I**s Arab democracy an oxymoron? Past experiences with regard to building an Arab *ishtirakiyya*, socialism, and *shuyu'ia*, communism., were not encouraging. However, nationalism, and the nation-state, both western exports or impositions, are entrenched in the Arab world. Regardless, the search for an Arab democracy, be it in a reluctant manner, is on. Words such as *damaqrata*, democratization, *dimuqratiyya*, democracy, *atta'addudiyya*, pluralism, and *shar'iyya*, legitimacy, are all themes and concepts pervasive in the present political discourse in the Arab world.

As Michael Hudson puts it, in analyzing Arab politics, it is easier to predict the past than the future.<sup>1</sup> Within the bounds of this perspective it is assumed that the process of Arab liberalization is one where progress is followed by retrogression, i.e., reversal or partial reversal of earlier democratic gains.

Although liberalization and democratization are used interchangeably, democratization is generally perceived to refer to a higher order of lasting and substantive political development.

The purpose of this paper is to survey progress made in Arab democratization and the setbacks which have occurred through retrogression.

## II. ARAB POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION: SOME GAINS

If one is to equate elections with democratization, then the Arab world is indeed moving on the right track. If democratization, however, signifies a higher order of substantive political and economic reforms, then liberalization is a more accurate term for describing current Arab democratic stirrings. Democratization can at this stage be appropriately attributed only to those countries in Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe that Huntington sees as making his Third Wave of democratization.<sup>2</sup> Not one single Arab country is near enough to crossing the threshold of democratization. Nonetheless, a process of both political and economic liberalization, genuine and cosmetic, has been in slow motion in some Arab countries. Ever since Sadat launched his ambitious *infitah* - openness - in the 1970s, Egypt has taken the lead in political and economic liberalization. In the 1980s, a few Arab countries of both the left and right sides of the political spectrum, seeking economic panacea and reinvigoration, have followed suit. In Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, Syria, not only is privatization<sup>3</sup> proceeding apace, but governments have also taken measures to woo international finance. Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria have all introduced attractive investment laws, continued to cut the size of the public sector and made tax concessions to the local private sector.

Politically, the torrent of electoral activities as of the second half of the 1980s would seem to signal that transition from authoritarianism is underway. On their own, elections are not adequate criteria for such a transition; the trickle-down effect of political liberalization, while being the most far-reaching since the Arab intelligentsia cried out for new thinking and democratization in the 1960s, remains very modest. Political liberalization remains modest in the sense that it has not decentralized power or broadened participation. The same ruling cliques, whether at the apex of the state, or in the hierarchy of political parties and movements still monopolize power. Rulers still must be endowed with the appropriate background for leadership: family, class, gender, corps officer, region, education, connection and power base (local clientele

and external sponsorship). Grass roots participation is, by and large, the missing link in the chain. For a sizable segment of Arab citizenry livelihood concerns still override politics. As the level of awareness increases, connection between the two is becoming inevitable. The political intimations of past bread riots lend credence to this point. By Arab standards, given the resistance to change or its incremental nature, recent Arab electoral experiments, regardless of freedom and fairness in them, or the lack thereof, and of their doubtful substantive outcomes, are indeed impressive, as shown in the table below.

Algeria	June 1990: Municipal & Provincial Elections. Dec. 1991: Multi-Party Parliamentary Elections.
Egypt <sup>1</sup>	Dec. 1991: Multi-Party Parliamentary Elections
Iraq	April 1990: Parliamentary Elections.
Iraq Kurdistan	May 1992: First Free Elections. For Kurdish Legislature.
Yemen	Nov. 1992: United Yemen's 1st Multi-Party Parliamentary Elections.
A.R. Yemen <sup>2</sup>	June 1988: Free Legislative Elections.
Kuwait	June 1990: National Council (Transitional) Oct. 1992: Parliamentary Elections.
Lebanon <sup>3</sup>	Aug-Sep. 1992: Three Phase National Assembly Elections.
Mauritania	Jan. 1992: Multi-Party Presidential Elections.*
Morocco	Sep. 1984: Multi-Party Legislative Assembly Elections.
Sudan <sup>4</sup>	April 1986: Multi-Party Legislative Assembly Elections.

1. Egypt has held regular elections since the mid 1970s.
2. The former Arab Republic of Yemen merged with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen to form the Republic of Yemen in May 1990.
3. Before the civil war, Lebanon knew a vibrant and democratic life.
4. The April 1986 elections brought the opposition into office, a unique event in the history of both Sudan and the Arab world.

Syria	May 1990: People's Council Elections.
Tunisia	April 1989: Multi-Party Municipal & National Assembly Elections.

- \* Mauritania's multi-party presidential elections were the first of their kind in the Arab world. In January 1988, local government elections were held in 32 districts and in January 1990, elections took place in some 164 rural communes. The most recent elections in Mauritania were the multiparty parliamentary elections of February 1992 involving at least six political parties and some 223 candidates that contested the country's 79-seat National Assembly.<sup>4</sup>

While these elections may have been marred by all sorts of irregularities and mostly failed to usher in greater accountability, wider participation and genuine pluralism, they signalled leadership attitudinal change. In the future, as democratic practices take hold in Arab societies, the ballot, rather than the bullet, self-endorsement or hereditary succession, will define the contours of power and its powerholders. This is in itself cause for optimism in the long run. Democratic evolution takes time. The evolution of western democracy is instructive. The interval between the generation of democratic ideals in the Age of Reason and their actual implementation in the twentieth century is roughly two hundred years. This is not to say that Arabs should wait two hundred years to get democracy. The age of speedy communications and cross-cultural contacts has made possible the universalization of human rights and democracy. If this electoral trend is allowed to continue and to be maintained and improved, hand in hand with institution building, there is no reason why genuinely democratizing Arab

countries should not cross the threshold of democracy by the turn of the century, without the upheavals and violence of Eastern Europe. Certainly, the Western perspective that Arabs lack a cultural basis for democracy verges on both racism<sup>5</sup> and ethnocentrism.

Political liberalization is evidenced also in the wave of constitutional reforms throughout the Arab world. Morocco has repeatedly amended its constitution.<sup>6</sup> Saudi Arabia has this year codified the principles of governance thus having its first written constitution. New constitutions or amended ones in Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia and Yemen enshrine universally recognized civil liberties, equality between the sexes, and legality. Egypt has changed its rigid electoral laws<sup>7</sup> so as to allow for wider opposition and independent parliamentary representation and Tunisia is reluctantly doing so. Legalization of political parties has seen their numbers expand in the Arab world at large. Algeria had, before the banning of the *Front Islamique due salut*, (Front of Islamic salvation or FIS), not less than 50 political parties. The Republic of Yemen, where multiparty parliamentary elections are taking place in November, there are more than 35 political parties. There is also an emerging form of accountability where office holders have been convicted of corruption. In Algeria, the indictment early in 1992 of Mustapha Beloucif<sup>8</sup>, an ex-army General, is one good example. Tunisia's ex-Secretary of State for National Security, Mohammed larbi Mahjoubi, was jailed for four years for abuse of office. He was apparently implicated in the 1988 slaying by Israeli agents of PLO second-in-command, Abu Jihad.



### III. PATTERNS OF RETROGRESSION :

Elections, being one democratic institution and one component of democratic development, are a useful yardstick for examining retrogression trends in Arab democratization. Study of both old and recent examples of Arab elections leads to two distinctive models: a reversal (U-turn) model and a zig-zag (see saw) model.

#### 1. The Reversal Model

Nearly every Arab country has had a manifestation of this model in its political development whether in elections, constitutional reforms or the area of civil liberties and human rights. Nowhere, however, is the reversal model more apparent than in elections, be they free and fair or not. Retrogression from holding elections to the earlier and usual form of direct rule or rule by decree is not a new phenomenon. In fact, retrogression has a clear historical pattern in Arab politics. Libya, Egypt and Iraq all experienced varying degrees of democratic stirrings in the 1950s, with elections held periodically. Reversal, in these cases, occurred invariably through a *coup d'etat* bringing a halt to the holding of elections and to the incipient forms of democratization.

The case of Libya (see table below) is instructive. How much of Libya's democratic experiment between the early 1950s and the late 1960s is known? The chances are that very little indeed is known especially as al-Qaddafi's Libya became prominent for revolutionary and "fireworks" politics. Libya's reputation for terrorism has most likely overshadowed its past modest experience in democratic politics. Between 1952 and the September 1969 coup Libya had four

general elections for the country's then Chamber of Deputies. Libyan women were given the vote in 1963 and exercised their rights in the elections of 1964 and 1965. In the early 1950s there were two political parties, the Party of Independence and the Congress Party of Tripolitania. Both contested the country's first election for the then Federal Chamber of Deputies in February 1952. With hindsight, and by Arab standards, that record is nothing less than remarkable; comparatively, it represents more elections than has been the case in post-independence Algeria. Had that limited democratic experiment continued, Libya would have been a leading democratic Arab country.

The historical pattern of reversal intermittently occurs in many Arab countries. It has recently been replicated in Algeria and before that in Sudan (see table below). These two countries' short lived experimentation with elections is indeed outstanding. The first saw the voting into office, in April 1986, of an opposition government; a unique happening in Arab politics. The second allowed for what seemed, between 1989 and 1991, an exemplary democratization project that appealed to the imagination of most democratically-minded Arabs.

The reversal model is not unfamiliar to the rule prevalent in the Gulf sheikdoms. Bahrain is one example. In December 1973, an election was held with some 30,000 voters choosing 30 members for the tiny Emirate's National Assembly. Parliamentary scrutiny, being anathema to most Gulf rulers, led in 1975 to the Assembly's dissolution by force of an amiri decree.

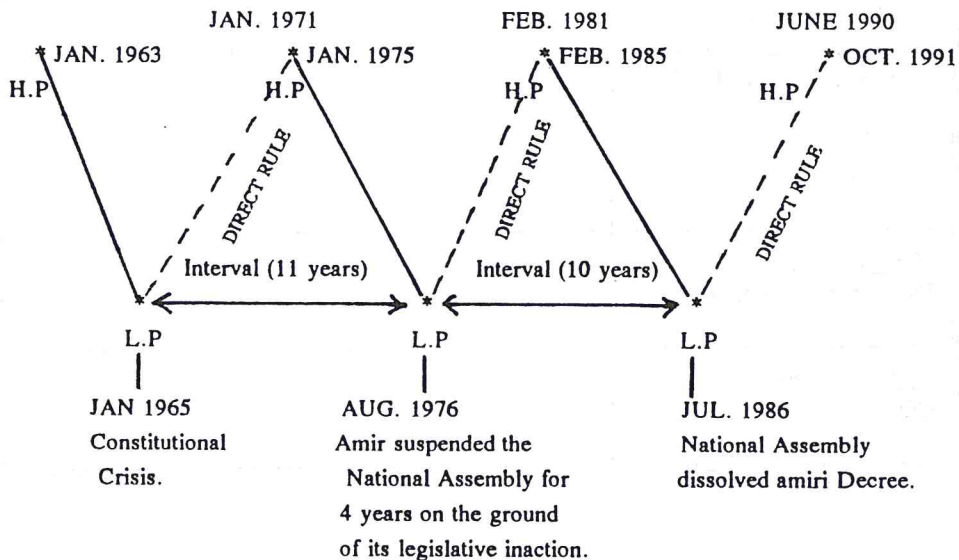
LIBYA	SUDAN	ALGERIA
<p><u>1952 February:</u> Election for the Federal Chambers of Deputies (Party of Independence and National Congress of Tripolitania).</p>	<p><u>1985 April :</u> People's Power following imposition of I.M.F. instigated austerity measures led to the ousting of Nissri.</p>	<p><u>1990 June 12th :</u> Municipal and provincial elections Arab world's freest and fairest.</p>
<p><u>1960 January :</u> General election (but no party systems).</p>	<p><u>1988 April :</u> Multi-party (some 40 parties) elections for a new Legislative Assembly.</p>	<p><u>1991 December :</u> Parliamentary multi-party elections (1st round).</p>
<p><u>1963 April :</u> Libya becomes a unitary state Parliamentary system Maintained Women accorded franchise.</p>	<p><u>1989 June 30th :</u> <u>COUP</u></p>	<p><u>1992 January 11th:</u> <u>COUP</u></p>
<p><u>1964 October :</u> General election: moderates won a majority of the 103 seats - women voted. King Idriss dissolved the Legislature on 13th February, 1965 owing to complaints of irregularities at the election.</p>		
<p><u>1965 May :</u> Parliamentary election.</p>		
<p><u>1969 September 1st:</u> <u>COUP</u></p>		

## 2. The Zig-Zag Model

This model is marked by alternate upward and downward trends in democratization development. Holding elections and cancelling their outcomes (such as dissolution of an elected legislature or cancellation of results) represent two extreme points in upward and downward trends. A reversal trend can be the first phase in a zig-zag trend. Egypt has held elections since the second half of the 1970s after an interval of more than 20 years. Libya, on the other hand, still remains an example *par excellence* of a reversal model where the democratic practice of holding elections was terminated with the 1969 coup and has not been resumed since.

When elections are a criterion, Kuwait represents an interesting case study of a zig-zag model (see graph below).

### ZIG ZAG/SEE SAW MODEL (KUWAIT)



H.P = High Points L.P = Low Points

Both in 1975 and 1985 the constitutional provision for election to be held within 2 months of dissolving the assembly was not observed. A few observations can be made about this model:

a) The years 1963, 1971, 1975, 1981, 1985, 1990 and 1992 represent the high points of the upward trend in this model, i.e., seven National Assembly elections between 1963 and 1992; roughly an average of one election every five years. This is impressive when compared with election records of most Arab countries, including more liberalized ones.

b) The years 1965, 1976 and 1986 represent the low points of the downward trend, usually leading to reversal of an election outcome, i.e., dissolution of the National Assembly. A retrogression to direct rule ensues. Accordingly, in the period from 1963 to 1992, direct rule was the norm between 1965 and 1971, 1976 and 1981, and 1986 and 1992 (given the fact that the 1990 election lacked authenticity and led to the formation of a toothless transitional council). Retrogression here equals 17 years of direct rule out of 29 years since 1963 and despite seven elections. In other words, elections or no elections, there is a bit of al-Assad or al-Qaddafi in the rulers of Kuwait. On a brighter note, however, Kuwait's zig-zag democratization path has to be seen as part of the overall evolution of democracy and political development. Other Arab countries, with fewer elections in their history, have even less foundation for future democratic development.

c) The time intervals between the low points of a downward trend are almost equal: 11 years between 1965 and 1976 and 10 years between 1976 and 1986. This is not to say that in 1996 or 1997 a downward trend will eventuate. Given the short time span involved, only some 30 years, this cannot at this stage be regarded a pattern but is notable nonetheless.

Morocco<sup>9</sup> qualifies as another example of the zig-zag model. This Maghribi nation has had more elections than most Arab countries, especially her immediate neighbours, Algeria and Tunisia. Between May 1963 and September 1984, Morocco had four multiparty parliamentary elections; an average of one election every five years. These elections did not always pass the test of freedom and fairness (and were in some instances boycotted by a few opposition groups), nor did they change the status quo. Nonetheless, these elections are in themselves a positive evolution, and if the number of municipal and provincial elections is added, then the total becomes substantially higher. The years 1969, 1976, 1977 and 1983 witnessed municipal and/or provincial electoral activities. If one were to increase the time span from May 1963 to the present - 1992 - what would become very conspicuous is not the number of elections that took place, but the number that did not take place. The delay factor is so obvious. The election due in May 1967 never took place; the next election was held in August 1970, three years later. The election due in August 1974, given the fact that the supposed life of any Moroccan Chamber of legislature is four years, was postponed until June 1977. The constitutional reforms introduced following the May 1980 referendum extended the life of Morocco's elected chamber of representatives to six years. Thus the chamber elected in June 1977 was due to go to the polls in 1983, but did not do so until September 1984. Similarly, the election due in 1990 never took place because a referendum held in December 1989 apparently approved the King's decision to hold that election in 1992; it will be held this December, according to the Moroccan government. Like Kuwait, Morocco had instances when the legislature was practically dissolved or paralysed. Following the multiparty elections of May 1963 Opposition representatives from both the Istiqlal (independence) Party and the National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP) faced persecution when they raised the

unpopular issue of corruption. Many of the leaders of the UNFP, which held 28 seats in the then 144 member legislature, were imprisoned, tortured, and a few sentenced to death in relation to an alleged coup against the king. The new legislature that was partly elected by direct suffrage in August 1970 was dissolved in 1972.

Unlike Kuwait, however, suppression of electoral activities and dissolution of the legislature, in a few instances of post-independence Morocco, did not mean the death of civil society. Morocco has always had a vibrant union movement and dynamic opposition parties which Kuwait has never had. The authoritarian state of Morocco is, however, responsible for more brutality than is encountered in Kuwait, because of the dynamism of Morocco's civil society. Dissolution of Kuwait's National Assembly was not coupled with as much dynamism, except in small pockets of the unofficial liberal opposition whose dedication to reform should not be underrated.

Nonetheless, both Arab states stand as good models of electoral zig-zagging. Despite the electoral activities in both countries, direct rule has had a significant imprint on the nature of governance and the nature of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled.

#### **IV. FORMS OF RETROGRESSION :**

Not only is retrogression a process of varying degrees, but also of varying levels of subtlety. Arab regimes almost invariably have a tendency to retrogress to earlier, more authoritarian, forms of government. Some persist with reform; Jordan being a case in point. At this juncture, the Hashemite kingdom, relative to the Arab

context, is an outstanding model of an incipient democracy. Its power-sharing arrangement bodes well for a future consensual polity and present representative parliamentary activity where the Islamist and the secularist inputs contest and co-exist. This formula may be far from being a perfection of pluralist politics, but it has to be seen in a contextual duality of Jordanian and Arab history: a positive synthesis breaking away from a long political tradition of undemocratic rule.

In other Arab countries, the form of retrogression indicates the defence mechanism or mechanisms - strategy - employed by an Arab regime in a phase of "*taqahqur*"<sup>10</sup> - retreat - from a phase, usually short, of political "*islah*" - reform - and "*infitah*" - openness. These mechanisms represent a continuum with co-optation and repression being its two diagonally opposed extremes. Movement along the continuum follows the swings of the political pendulum. At a breaking point marked the swings of the political pendulum. At a breaking point marked by high mobilization of the political street - Islamists, students, unionists - or the marginalized street - *khobzists*<sup>11</sup> (bread-seekers) and *Hittists*<sup>12</sup> (unemployed)- a threatened Arab regime reacts decisively. The tactical response makes full use of the state's reserve of coercive power. The army is invited to defend "state institutions", "public property", "national security" and, in some cases (Algeria in January 1992), to "uphold the constitution". The bread riots of the mid and late 1980s in the Maghrib, Sudan, Egypt and Jordan are instructive. The Tunis, Algiers and Jordan massacres (respectively in January 1984, October 1988, and April 1989) are high forms of repression underlying low regime confidence.

Similarly, at times of high confidence, Arab regimes are capable of political acrobatics, or "political ju-jitsu". Both contrived and



fortuitous factors lie at the core of a given Arab regime's high confidence. Crackdown comes to mind as a prime example of a contrived factor. With a formidable opposition party outlawed, its leaders jailed or exiled, its credibility discredited, Arab rulers are more likely to feel at ease to perform *voltes faces*: invite weaker opposition groups for consultation, co-opt opposition elements whose self-serving zeal transcends altruistic idealism, and even hold elections assured of safeguarding the status quo. This stunt public relations amounts to no more than a smoke screen that usually not only scores points for the ruling elite and its guided democracy, but also further divides opposition forces, with a few elements crossing the floor. Tunisia's Ben Ali continues his overtures to the (non-threatening) legal secular opposition parties. If they agree to his flirtations, the banning of the formidable, moderate, Islamist *al-Nahda*, will become generally accepted; a consensus in an exclusive polity as the basis for democratization and a prize the Tunisian President, an avowed opponent of any role for Islam in politics, wants very badly. Similarly, rulers in neighbouring Algeria will most probably put political "*infitah*" back on their agenda when the outlawed Front of Islamic Salvation (FIS) is a spent force - if ever - and regime confidence has been recovered.

Turning a benign face is more often than not a product of fortuitous events. Change of power is usually a ripe time for releasing political prisoners, lifting press censorship and making promises that rarely see fulfilment. This *realpolitik* is a *modus operandi* for legitimation of the government. The quest for legitimacy is a priority for rulers replacing charismatic or "heroic" leaders. Sadat launched a quasi new deal after Egypt's limited victory in the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Both political and economic reforms loomed large in his new deal, which was designed

both to shake off Nasser's ghost - his popularity - as well as to establish Sadat's independent persona on his own merits and with his own historical legitimacy - winning the Ramadan War.<sup>13</sup> Ben Ali must have grappled with the same inferiority complex after his November 1987 "medical coup", the ousting of the ailing octogenarian, Habib Bourguiba, one of the leading heroes of Tunisia's independence. Ben Ali was packaged in the state-controlled media as "*Hami al-Islam*" - the protector of Islam - which was quite ironic for, being responsible for security and then Minister of the Interior, he was no doubt instrumental in the oppression that marked the final years of his predecessor's rule. His era was hailed as "*la deuxieme Republique*" - the second republic. These were powerful idioms, disowning a past tarnished by severe economic down-turns and political stagnation. Bourguiba is nowadays relegated to the less flamboyant title of "The Leader of Independence", a far cry from the self-assigned title "*le combattant supreme*" - supreme "struggler".

This left Ben Ali room to claim a place in Tunisia's history books. It would be easy to see, from the second republic perspective, that Bourguiba was the leader of the first republic and Ben Ali the leader of the second republic; the former, leader of the first liberation (from colonialism), the latter, hero of the second liberation (from tyranny). The first always saw himself as the system, the second probably sees himself as democracy itself. Ben Ali's November 1987 maiden speech contained promises which remain substantially unfulfilled.<sup>14</sup> What remains, however, is its corollary, the so-called "November Spirit" - a reference to the Tunisian President's promised higher standards of democracy and human rights.

Retrogressive forms are not exclusive to the Arab political milieu. They encompass an array of strategies that most states, including democratic ones, use inside their realms for state *raisons d'etre*. While some of these strategies smack of Machiavellian rationalism, others verge on Stalinist draconianism. Scapegoatism, tokenism, co-operation and repression are weapons in the arsenal of most, if not all, authoritarian Arab states. Repression has physical (detention, liquidation, torture etc), legal (emergency rule, censorship), psychological (fear of the secret police) and political (discriminatory measures) manifestations. These strategies can be used separately or together.

#### V. PRACTICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF RETROGRESSION IN ARAB POLITICS:

##### 1. Scapegoatism :

Given their dubious legitimacy, most Arab regimes have developed a proclivity for "passing the buck". The absence of checks and balances make it a readily available safety valve for Arab rulers and historically, colonialism, imperialism, Zionism and weternism have all been obvious scapegoats. Externalization of the roots of Arabic domestic problems has not always been unfounded. Some of it, however, verges on the ridiculous. Libya's Al-Qaddafi is known for his flair for conspiratorial theorizing; the AIDS virus in his view was a C.I.A. brainchild. Examples like this are not rare.

In relation to political *islah*, scapegoatism has been astutely employed to exclude threatening opposition forces, or simply to delay the process altogether. Before and after the Second Gulf War and, even more, following the near electoral victory of the Islamists

in Algeria in December 1991, Arab regimes, in a heightened state of alert, made full use of scapegoatism when dealing with Islamists.

As a tactic, scapegoatism has three layers of operation: internal, inter-Arab and international.

Internally, selective stigmatization of formidable opposition is used. Stigmatization is an age-old effective strategy especially in Arab countries where regime monopoly of the electronic media allows for the widest possible propagation of its propaganda. The credulity of a sizable segment of the populace, notably in Arab countries with high illiteracy and scant alternative sources of information, makes this tactic all the more effective. Dissidents are usually dismissed as *agents provocateurs*. Egypt's ex-Minister of the Interior - known as the Ministry of the Interior in Arab popular circles - Zaki Badr, a hardliner, dismissed opponents and human rights activists as homosexuals. Today, Islamists are labelled, amongst many things, as terrorist, hypocritical, and undemocratic.

This is indeed a powerful device. It places opposition forces on public trial and puts them on the defensive. The onus on these forces to clear their names becomes imperative. It is a role reversal *par excellence*; the regime does not have to do any explaining. Explaining flagging economic performance, corruption, repression, indebtedness and unemployment, grievances known for triggering dissidence, social discontent and protest, does not make good political sense when labelling and stigma do the trick.

At the level of inter-Arab politics, scapegoatism is rife. The building blocks for it are both old and new. There are many instances in Arab history where the regime next-door, rightly or wrongly, has been the scapegoat for subversion, for export of

unwanted creeds and for "treason to the Arab Nation" or Islam. Al-Qaddafi was always a good candidate; Nasser was another. Recently, Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, have refused to take responsibility for their local Islamists' dissatisfaction with the regimes and their pressing demands for legalization and a role in the political game. Sudan, where Dr. Turabi's National Islamic Front assumed *de facto* power, has been accused of training and exporting Islamist militants.<sup>15</sup>

Tunisia's Ben Ali, with his sound security background, made headlines in North Africa and Europe when he claimed possession of video evidence of Sudan's involvement in the training of Islamist militants. Saudi Arabia<sup>16</sup>, with its funding of Islamists, shares the blame. Jittery Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt have disapprovingly aired, privately and publicly, during the popular upheavals in the lead-up to Desert Storm, resentment of the Saudi petro-dollar connection. Ironically, Arab regimes, while excluding their own domestic political opposition, go out of their way to embrace opposition groups of unfriendly Arab countries. It is an old formula of Arab politics: "My enemy's enemy is my friend".

Internationalization of a problem is the third layer of scapegoatism. Regime concern with the surge of Islamism and its perceived threat is a good example. The return of Islam as an international bogey has been helped by the hysteria drummed up by some Arab regimes<sup>17</sup>, as in Tunisia where Ben Ali's coniage of the term "fundamentalists' international"<sup>18</sup>, a reference to Islamism, is a dramatization equating the new Islamist threat with the old communist threat in the now defunct bi-polar world order. France<sup>19</sup>, witnessing a wave of Muslimphobia and fearing unwanted "boat people" fleeing a potential Islamized Maghrib, is sympathetic to the secular rulers. The idea of a mini-Marshall Plan to offset the

socio-economic problems giving rise to Islamism, is one idea proposed by Maghribi regimes. Naturally, if there is an Islamist internationale, Iran is its Moscow. Many an Arab regime has strained relations with the Islamic Republic.

This kind of scapegoatism has no limits. In May 1992, Kuwait, claiming foreign meddling in internal affairs, barred an American democracy workshop.<sup>20</sup> The workshop, co-sponsored by the Kuwaiti Graduate society and the Washington-based International Republican Institute, was to be on the management of election campaigns. A similar workshop took place earlier in the year in Kuwait City.

This obstructionism in an election year is a reasonably good gauge of lack of confidence and unease about possible fall-out from the flight of the rich emirate's rulers from Kuwait when Iraq invaded. That the seminar was "foreign meddling" in the eyes of the Kuwaiti authorities is indeed both bizarre and paradoxical; didn't this very foreign meddling liberate Kuwait and return her autocrats to their gilded palaces?

## 2. Tokenism :

The hollow concessional approach in the form of tokenism is well mastered by Arab autocrats. It is a deflatory tool, primarily designed to ease pressure for change and demands for reform. Longtime unfulfilled promises are met with a minimum degree of sincerity. It is the tokenist gesture itself, usually perceived as a first positive step, not its content, that ephemerally confines some dissident pressure. Tokenism gives the regime breathing space while at the same time it sharpens opposition taste for future bargaining and piecemeal gains.

Democratic reforms that followed *khobz* - bread - riots in Algeria could be regarded as tokenist measures delivering no more than tokenist democracy. While former president Chadli<sup>21</sup> and a few liberal elements might have been serious in their democratizing endeavours, that could not be said of the "standpatters"<sup>22</sup> within the *Front de Liberation National* and the army. Recent events in Algeria confirm this. The temporary lifting of censorship bans, the declaration of general amnesties, and the creation of human rights and constitutional committees may not be devoid of political benevolence, but nonetheless, they carry the seeds of expediency, for they often fail the litmus test of permanence. Duplicity is the name of the game. One ban is lifted, a second is imposed. Freedom from jail now does not mean no detention later. Arab *ad-hoc* committees are mostly just facades.

The symbolism of political tokensim is at the heart of its retrogressive nature. In other words "what you see, ain't what you get". It is a quick fix, a gimmick. Instead of political *islah*, what is delivered is pseudo *islah*. The recent Saudi outline of the Kingdom's basic principles of governance have a degree of tokensim with its characterizing elements of symbolism and duplicity. The outline itself, in King Fahd's speech of March 1, 1992, amounted to a declaration of Saudi Arabia's first written constitution, although the word constitution itself appeared nowhere in the speech. It was, however, alluded to by use of the word *nitham* - system.<sup>23</sup> The term "constitution" has a secular significance which does not fit well with the Kingdom's politico-religious system based on the Quran and Prophet Muhammad's *Sunna* - his sayings and deeds.

That King Fahd delivered a codified system of rule defining the contours of power and its centers, the long-awaited consultative

assembly and provincial governorates, was indeed reason for optimism and celebration in many Saudi and Arab circles. However, *Haris al-Haramain*, the custodian of the two holy shrines, left no doubt where the locus of power resided; with his majesty and the *Amirs*.

Saudis and their *ulama*, jurists, who felt uneasy about foreign troops' deployment in the Kingdom and some of them who were vocal<sup>24</sup> with their reservations about the Saudi system, are finally getting their *majlis al-shura*, consultative assembly. The *majlis*' sixty members will be appointed by none other than the King from amongst those of high standing and knowledge. They won't be elected directly by Saudi citizens. The governorates will be headed by *Amirs*, with ministerial rank, who will choose their administrative aides.

While the definition of the Kingdom's system and subsystems of rule is commendable and probably has met the overall demands of the conservative *ulama*, it could not have appeased the Saudi liberal-minded unofficial opposition, which is based in America and Europe. Aziz Abu Hamad, a Saudi, articulated the symbolism and duplicity inherent in King Fahd's pseudo reforms. Hamad's response, contained in a *Middle East Watch* report entitled "Empty Reforms"<sup>25</sup>, pinpoints many a pitfall: strengthening of the King's power, no provision for elections, silence or tentativeness on universal human rights and no provision for banning extra-judicial killings, inhumane punishment and torture. But for now, at least, pressure has been eased on the Saudi rulers by their finally honouring the promise made in the 1960s, to have a consultative assembly.



Another common form of tokenism is changing the name of the ruling party. In July 1977, at Sadat's behest, the old ruling Arab Socialist Party became the National Democratic Party, the ruling party in Egypt now. President Sadat, enveloped in his drive to innovate, packaged the change of name as the actual creation of a new party. Borrowing a leaf from Sadat's book, in February 1988, barely three months in power, President Ben Ali adopted the new name, *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique*, Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), as a replacement for the ruling *Parti socialiste Destourien*, Socialist Constitutional Party. In both changes, the adjective 'socialist' was dropped, and the populist word "democratic" was substituted.

### 3. Co-optation :

Had Arab regimes allowed for a wider, deeper and more permanent inclusion of opposition movements and their inputs at all strata of the political system, accommodation, not co-optation, would have been the operative norm. Interestingly, Arab regimes co-opt to look accommodating. Upon accession to power, Ben Ali of Tunisia applied co-optation skillfully. Worried by both his military/security background, and the police state bequeathed to him by his predecessor, the former General used co-optation as one of his strategies to give his new regime a gloss of pluralism, humanism and respectability. For instance, a handful of opposition members and human rights activists were given ministerial portfolios. In July 1988, Sadeddine Zmerli was named Health Minister. In April, the following year, Mohammed Charfi was appointed Minister for Education and Science. Independents Dali Jazi and Ahmed Smaoui are two other examples.

King Hassan of Morocco, an experienced statesman, intermittently applied co-optation with immaculate shrewdness. Veteran opposition politicians like Mohammed Boucetta, Abd al-Rahim Bouabid, Maati Bouabid and many others have, over the years, for all intents and purposes, been included a cabinet.

In Algeria, coming after the forced resignation of the reforming Chadli Ben Jedid, the head of the council of state Mohammed Boudiaf employed a co-optative policy before this assassination. Three members of the opposition, including Islamists<sup>26</sup>, were included in cabinet. Co-optation cannot entirely be blamed on Arab governments. Opposition forces and figures value office and equate power with it. This is underlined by the Arab term *al-kursi*, the chair, a symbol of power. In Arab popular circles, the view is that politicians want one thing: *al-Kursi*. This underlies public distrust of politics and politicians.

Co-optation is also a kind of a "divide and rule" tactic; it certainly alienates the co-opted and their supporters from mainstream opposition and, at times, spawns schisms within the one movement. In Tunisia, the moderate leader of the illegal *al-Nahdha*, Abd al-Fattah Mouro, is tolerated so long as he refrains from political organizing. In Egypt, co-optation of moderate, but illegal, Islamic opposition is a declared policy of President Hosni Mubarak. Tolerated Islamist opposition are allowed to field candidates in elections in conjunction with legal parties; Islamists seen by the government as terrorists cannot do so. This toleration is a sophisticated form of co-optation.

#### 4. Disinformation :

There are at least three objectives of disinformation: to justify a crackdown on target opposition; to alienate its supporters, and to garner sympathy for the government.

Tunisian authorities' obsession with the Islamist threat is indeed hysterical; in fact, it is a hot political item in Tunisia's external relations. Both France and England have been lobbied to reverse their granting of political asylum to leaders and members of *Al-Nahdha*. Security agreements have been signed with a few Arab countries, notably, Egypt, to exchange information on Islamists' activities and movements. Tunisia has approached Pakistan<sup>27</sup> to make similar security arrangements.

Domestically, that obsession has overshadowed more important matters. It is almost a ready-made convenience to divert public attention from the country's flagging economy and soaring unemployment. The so-called "Operation Divine Mission", allegedly foiled in 1991, and the trials of 279 Islamist defendants are instructive. The government's description of the operation, the alleged aim of which was the violent overthrow of the Tunisian republic and assassination of key government leaders, is too tidy to be convincing.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly, extremist Islamists have in the past resorted to violence in Tunisia. In the 1980s extremists, using a home-made bomb, attacked a hotel causing serious injury to an English tourist. In October 1991, five members of *al-Nahdha* were hanged after being convicted of burning to death a security guard in a Tunisian ruling party office. According to Abdallah Kallel, Minister of the Interior,

the operation was very elaborate involving the military wing of *al-Nahdha*. His version of the so-called "commandos of sacrifice" to "overthrow the government" and to "install a religious, totalitarian state" makes for a perfect Hollywood film script. Not only, said he, had the government seized "hundreds of weapons, delayed-action bombs and about 10,000 hand grenades", but it had also discovered a detailed five-point plan combining "psychological preparation of the population", and "intense publicity" aimed at educational institutions, with a third stage of commando attacks on state institution and personnel and a fourth stage of street demonstrations. If all else failed, contingency plans envisaged plunging the country into a constitutional vacuum by the political assassination of President Ben Ali, Kallel himself and many others. The Islamists have allegedly acquired a U.S. stinger rocket from Afghan *Mujahideen* to shoot down the presidential plane since storming Ben Ali's fortified Carthage palace was, in their scheme of events, foredoomed to failure. These claims were treated with reserve both in Europe and the U.S.A.<sup>29</sup>

The wealth of details about the plot was in contrast to the dearth of evidence to support the allegations. The scale of this alleged plot is too elaborate and grand to be totally credible, especially in a police state with ubiquitous secret agents' infiltration of state and society. Video-taped confessions presented in July 1992 before the military court presiding over the trials were, according to the defendants, obtained under torture.<sup>30</sup> Some of the Islamist defendants could have very possibly contemplated violence and been prepared to engage in it against the authorities. Equally, however, the authorities could have capitalized on evidence of a smaller plot by magnifying it to fit its own strong fixation on a big Islamist threat. The "grandness" of the plot, the alleged implication of

*Al-Nahdha*'s leader in exile, Rached Ghannouchi, and his members, the wide publicity given the trials were attended by a large contingent of the international media and of diplomats, and the seriousness of the allegations, implying the latent and actual violent and undemocratic nature of Islamists, were all calculated to put the kiss of death upon the most formidable opposition in Tunisia.

While the extent of public sympathy for the regime is hard to measure, aid donors and the World Bank have, under the U.S. leadership and pressure, given pecuniary support. By showing the world the alleged terrorism of *al-Nahdha*, the government has unwittingly exposed its own failure because its repressive and exclusive policies are equally to blame for the violence attributed to the Islamists.

#### 5. Repression :

There are varying degrees of repression as there are degrees of authoritarianism in the Arab world. Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and Lebanon have less severe forms of authoritarianism than Syria, Iraq, (which Michael Hudson views as the quintessential *mukhabarat* - secret police - state) and Libya. The Arabian Gulf emirates and Saudi Arabia, despite their rigid patrimonialism, pervasive family patronage and autocratic rule, are considered "benevolent"<sup>31</sup> authoritarian systems. Accordingly, theoretically one would expect more political killings in Iraq, Syria and Libya than in Morocco or Saudi Arabia, and this is the case. The security apparatus is even more sophisticated and ubiquitous in Iraq<sup>32</sup> than is the case in Kuwait. Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Algeria, which by any measure are less authoritarian than Iraq or Syria, have police and secret police forces which are just as

sophisticated. The brutality may be the same when used in Saudi Arabia (as in the 1979 Mecca rebellion), in post-liberation Kuwait (where many Palestinians and Arabs were killed and more than 300,000 deported), and in Syria (Hamma, 1982). What makes the difference is the scale and frequency of police brutality, and also the breadth of political participation, the presence of associations, unions, movements and parties, freedom of the press, quality of civil liberties, women's and minority rights, access to information, the pace and quality of political change and social justice.

No empirical research using these criteria has been undertaken to allow for a precise and definite comparison between the various Arab authoritarianisms. But we know that Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, Algeria, Sudan and Yemen have legalized political parties, and trade and professional associations. They, with Kuwait, but except for Sudan, have freer press than elsewhere in the Arab world. Women in Tunisia and Egypt fare better than their counterparts in Algeria, Sudan, or Kuwait. Kuwait, however, held far more elections and had more vibrant parliamentary activities than Algeria, Tunisia or Jordan. So whose authoritarianism is better or worse? Well, that depends on who you are. For a women, Tunisian authoritarianism is probably more attractive than Saudi Arabia's. If you are an unemployed Tunisian worker, Saudi Arabia provides a better chance of work and a higher living standard. If you are an Islamist Jordan would be the place to go. Privileged Iraqis or Syrians probably do not even think about their regimes' authoritarianisms if they present no hindrances to profit-making. Until such time as discerning empirical studies adjudicate among Arab authoritarianisms, they will remain essentially a personal or a group perception decided by class, gender, religion, political ideology, ethnicity and education or awareness.

If Arab regimes are essentially authoritarian, then they are also essentially repressive. Repression is still the cornerstone of most Arab governments' mode of stemming opposition, challenge and change. Repression is also retrogressive because it represents a reaction whereby the logic of force takes precedence over rationality and legality. Repression is multi-faceted. It is of importance in this analysis where it is seen to impede democratization and consequently, as a retrogressive phenomenon, repression is antithetical to the democratic trend that has begun in parts of the Arab world in the recent past. From this perspective repression is not only a clear case of duplicity, but casts doubt on some Arab cases of guided democracy, where the pace of change is controlled from above and hence is accelerated or decelerated at whim. The forms of repression identified below reflect patterns of rule in most Arab countries.

a. Undue influence of coercive power :

Physical repression remains a state resort where brute force by either the police, the security apparatus, or sometimes the army is applied. It is an indication of the disproportionate role coercion plays, in comparison with the role of dialogue and persuasion, and of the fact that Arab states remain, more or less, police states. Not less than half of all Arab heads of state bring to government a military background which accustoms them to imposing uniformity, maintaining discipline, expecting obedience and using force. Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, making up three quarters of the Arab world's population, are ruled by military or former military officers. This, perhaps, helps explain why the most serious human rights violations have happened, or still happen, in countries in this group. In Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, which are experiencing varying levels of democratization, the authorities'

emphasis on coercion dents the credibility of recent democratization initiatives. How could political liberalization be taken seriously if it is not consistent with improving human rights?

In Egypt and Tunisia, regime sensitivity to the activities and reports of local human rights organizations is reflected in dismissal of their reports, harassment of their activists and refusal to publish their findings. Ben Ali went further. In June 1992 year he ordered the closing down of the *Ligue Tunisienne pour la Defense des Droits de L'Homme* (LTDH), the Tunisian Human Rights League. The league was outlawed for refusing to comply with the new law on associations. This new law, which was rubber-stamped by the Constitutional Council, banned politicians from membership of private organizations.<sup>33</sup> This was unacceptable to the LTDH whose activists were both from the opposition and the government itself. The new law, which contravenes the principle of free association, has terminated, for now at least, the activities of what was the Arab world's oldest and most active Human Rights watchdog, one Ben Ali's regime would rather not have.<sup>34</sup> Despite the seemingly improved political climate, Arab Human Rights activists still distrust Arab regimes' unpredictability, even in such countries as Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco. As a contingency, for instance, The Arab Human Rights Organization, although Cairo-based, has its bank account and duplicate documentation in Geneva.<sup>35</sup>

Details of violations and atrocities committed in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Morocco are well documented in Amnesty International's reports. They indicate recurring and new patterns. Torture, for instance, remains widely used. Amnesty International's October 1991 report on Egypt "Egypt: Ten Years of Torture", confirms this. Torture techniques included, besides infliction of pain, sexual abuse or the threat of it not only against victims, but also their relatives.



In Tunisia, at least eleven died (Amnesty International should use "were murdered") in custody. Amnesty's March 1992 33-page report "Tunisia: Prolonged Incommunicado Detention And Torture," cited torture as the most likely cause of death. Disturbing circumstances surrounded the death of Faisal Barakat, an Islamist from the illegal *al-Nahdha*. The Tunisian authorities initially denied that he was arrested in the first place. At the time of his death the authorities maintained that he died in a road accident. Sworn testimony to Amnesty by a British Professor of Forensic Medicine, analyzing the autopsy report of the 25 years-old mathematics student, concluded that he died "as a result of the forceful insertion of a foreign object at least 6 inches into the anus".<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, this is not an isolated example.

Incommunicado detention, re-detention<sup>37</sup>, and mass arrests of Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt, since the Gulf War, have been systematic, and this has also been the case in Algeria since the FIS was outlawed early this year. Figures supplied by Amnesty show that at least 8,000 Islamists<sup>38</sup> are held illegally in a regime crackdown on *al-Nahdha*. Several thousand FIS supporters are detained in five prison camps in the Algerian Sahara and the death penalty is still commonplace in both Algeria and Tunisia. In the latter, five Islamists were hanged in October 1991 despite Ben Ali's declared opposition to the death penalty to an Amnesty delegation in March 1988. In fact, he was reported to have stated that he would not sign any death warrant. In the former, 13 Islamists, convicted as in Tunisia of acts of violence involving death, were sentenced to death. Forcible conscription into the Tunisian army is a known regime practice in dealing with university activists.<sup>39</sup>

In Egypt, as though emergency powers are not enough, a new anti-terrorism law was introduced in July 1992. This law, stipulating

the death penalty for engagement in terrorist acts, hard labour for harbouring terrorism and a five-year jail term for membership of terrorist groups, has been criticized as draconian and unnecessary. Under the provisions of this law, mere possession of material that can be construed as condoning terrorism is a crime. Critics of the law fear further strengthening of police powers.<sup>40</sup> Under the emergency rule, imposed in 1967 and lifted only between May 1980 and October 1981, human rights violations and police abuses in detention centres have been a hallmark of some 23 years of post-independence Egypt.

Minimum safeguards and guarantees embodied in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976), and the United Nations Convention Against Torture (1984), are not provided under the emerging semi-liberalized systems in the countries mentioned above. Being signatories to these international covenants seems to be, at this stage at least, mere window dressing.

b. Exclusion :

Lack of pluralism is one of the constants of Arab politics. Recent repression in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Kuwait contradict the regimes' declared drive to decentralize power and allow for pluralist politics. The ruling elites in these countries remain exclusive. Intolerance and exclusion of Islamists in the first three countries account today for the rising levels of violence between these states and Islamist militants. Repression by way of exclusion from the political process breeds contempt for authority and forces Islamists underground. The systematic repression of Islamists described above amounts to political cleansing.<sup>41</sup> It is grounded in the belief held by many Arab rulers that separation of religion and politics must form a pillar of the present and future socio-political contract under

their systems. The signals are mixed. Egypt concedes to Islamists a limited role in politics via the ballot box, but not outright legalization. Algeria seemed for a while to tolerate Islamists despite the July 1989 law on associations which prohibited formation and legalization of religious parties. The experiment collapsed early this year with the cancellation of the second round of the December 1991 elections, when the FIS seemed poised to win power. Tunisia, under Ben Ali, has had second thoughts about accommodating Islamists. The April 1989 multi-party elections (the second since 1983), where Islamists participating as independents won more than 13% of the vote, was not comforting for the regime. It was an opportunity to assess the Islamists' electoral strength and potential. The view must have been that, if legalized, a more organized Islamist party operating without regime hindrances could pose a real threat to the ruling party. Accordingly, it was on the basis of calculations of regime survival and Islamists' success probabilities that the banning of an Islamist party in Tunisia was conceived. More recently, the refusal to legalize a proposed Tunisian Labour Party must have been motivated by similar calculations. It is this ambivalence, from Algeria to Tunisia, that undermines popular confidence in guided democracy, and in democracy in general.

The never ending issue of separation of politics and religion in Arab politics exposes a blatant case of hypocrisy on the part of ruling elites. How often has a supposedly secular leader used Islam to legitimate his hold on power? One Anwar Sadat was once *al-raï al-mu'min*, the pious president. In 1984, Sudan's Nimeri amended the constitution enshrining, in the new article 80, his status as *amir al-muminin*, the commander of the faithful.<sup>42</sup> Of course, the *umma*, nation, of Islam was very lucky in having at the same time a second commander of the faithful in the person of King Hassan of Morocco.

Depoliticization of the mosque is almost impossible. While arguing for *imams*, prayer leaders, to be non-partisan, the regimes in Algeria and Tunisia, where Islamist *imams* are being uprooted, are appointing their own *imams*,<sup>43</sup> those who could be relied upon to support the rulers' own version of Islam, *al-islam al rasmi*, establishment Islam. Establishment Islam reciprocates a dependency relationship with the regimes. The latter receives divine blessing, as was the case during the Second Gulf war when a *fatwa* (ruling by Muslim jurists) was needed to justify the deployment of foreign troops in Saudi Arabia and *jihad*, holy war, against Iraq. The former gets in return the means of its existence. Even when rulers prefer Islam to be relegated to a personal religious experience, interference seems to be unavoidable. In Tunisia wearing beards sometimes invites harassment by the security forces. For women wearing the *hijab*, veil, it is as hazardous. President Mubarak is reported to have described veiled women as *tentes ambulantes*,<sup>44</sup> moving or walking tents. Flagrant political interference in religion is not unknown. Former Tunisian President for life, Habib Bourguiba, made history in this regard. He took it upon himself to extend *ijtihad*, application of reason, a role reserved for *ahl al hal wa al-aqd*, those who bind and loose, i.e., jurists, to Islamic aspects for which clear Quranic injunctions exist, an act that is considered blasphemous in Islam. In 1974 he sought to interpret the Quranic law regarding inheritance so as to achieve equality between the sexes.<sup>45</sup> In other cases he clearly implied the irrelevance of fasting in Ramadan in a developing economy. Regardless of the daring progressiveness of his thinking, interpreting the *Shari'a*, Islamic Law, was one case where the boundaries between Islam and politics were deliberately waived by a politician. Bourguiba justified his *ijtihad* in 1974 on the basis of being the ruler of the land, and thus, in Islamic terms, Commander of the Faithful.

The issue of separation in Arab politics does not stop at the nature of the relationship between religion and politics. What about separation between the judiciary and the executive? What about the separation between the executive and the legislature? What about depoliticization of the military so that the ruling generals go back to the barracks? What about the separation between the state and the ruling parties?

The existing Arab political paradigm is conspicuously patriarchal. The near absence of women or their exclusion from politics attests to retrogression in current democratization undertakings. Kuwaiti women have again seen the passing of another election without being accorded voting rights.<sup>46</sup> During Iraqi occupation, in the Jeddah Kuwait Popular Congress held on October 13, 1990, the *Amir* prince, Jaber Ahmad al-Sabah, promised to restore parliament and increase political freedoms. The October 1992 election should, depending on whether an independent or mummified parliament evolves<sup>47</sup>, take care of the first promise. As to increasing political freedoms, the *Amir* could try a little harder. Kuwaiti women are incensed by what they see as flagrant ingratitude by not being redeemed for their resistance against the Iraqi invaders, especially when the emirate's political patriarchs fled to safety in Saudi Arabia. Kuwaiti women's vociferousness about the franchise is wide-ranging. Women at the forefront of the fight for the women's vote include well-known intellectual and member of the ruling family, Dr. Suad Al-Sabah, writer Noura Al-Saddani, and radio broadcaster, Aisha Al-Yahya. A leading women's rights activist and legal expert, Badria Al-Awadi, has recently described as unconstitutional the 1962 election law waiving women's right to vote.<sup>48</sup> Article one of the election law reserves the right to vote for "Kuwaiti males aged 21 years and above". This has been disputed by Al-Awadi, a doctor in international law, as in clear contradiction of

article 29 of the constitution enshrining equality of the sexes. Article 29 reads: "People are equal in human dignity and before the law in rights and duties and there is no discrimination among them because of sex, race, language and religion". General support for women's right to vote within the five pro-democracy and Islamic opposition groups contesting the October election exists. Pro-democracy figures such as Ahmad Al-Khatteb, Jassem Al-Qatami, veteran politicians, and Abdullah Nibari, of the Kuwaiti Democratic Forum, are unequivocal in their support. Ahmad Baqir, leader of the Islamic movement, *Al-Salaf*, origin, although reluctantly, has also expressed support for women's voting rights. Many are optimistic that the next National Assembly will almost inevitably approve a bill to that effect.

Scepticism, however, lingers on. Many of today's male supporters of votes for Kuwaiti women, are yesteryear's National Assembly members who in 1981 sided with the Al-Sabahs dominated government by voting against a proposed bill to grant the franchise to women. Another reservation stems from the slow pace of change in the conservative emirate. A popular joke underscores this reality by stating that the quickest decision ever made by the *Amir* was to escape Kuwait on the eve of the Iraqi invasion. But is it a luxury to stress the exclusion of Kuwaiti women under the existing two-tier system that also excludes Kuwaiti males whose forebears were not residents before 1920? The two-tier system according to Kuwaiti philosophy professor, Ahmad Al-Rab'i, effectively divides Kuwaiti citizenship into first and second classes.<sup>49</sup>

Exclusion only serves to reinforce the lack of plurality in the Arab theatre of domestic politics. Although women remain the biggest minority, not only in Arab politics, Arab men too are greatly excluded. Ethnic and religious minorities do not fare any better.

Until such a time as bold political reformers correct these inequalities, Arab democratization initiatives will remain tainted by retrogression within them.

#### VI. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS :

The 1980s, especially its second half, are unprecedented in terms of domestic reforms in Arab history. The breadth of political liberalization is indeed impressive. Holding multi-party presidential elections in Mauritania would have seemed an aberration just five years ago. It has happened this year. Liberalization, however, still lacks depth and permanence. One hand takes what the other gives. Elections have not stopped repression. Legalization of political parties has not spared opposition figures harassment. Promulgation or amendment of constitutions has not meant legality and rationality in Arab liberalizing countries.

This kind of ambivalence or duplicity proves the hypothesis that retrogression is inherent in liberalization initiatives of the 1980s. The pattern of retrogression is reflected in the categories of liberalizing Arab countries. Algeria and Sudan terminated, respectively in 1992 and 1989, what can be described, by Arab standards, two outstanding democratic experiments. This reversal pattern echoes the short-lived democratic experiments of the 1950s and 1960s such as in Libya and in Egypt. Between 1952 and 1969, Libya for instance, had more parliamentary elections than had modern Tunisia in her entire independence period. Morocco is an outstanding case of a vacillating liberalizing Arab country. The long-awaited elections, already overdue in 1990 and postponed by referendum for this year, are yet to take place. Liberalization is subject to King Hassan's whim.

Tunisia and Egypt, considered in the west as semi-democratic, have undertaken commendable liberalization measures. Yet their worsening human rights, crackdown on Islamists, election irregularities, power monopoly, absence of separation of power, on the one hand, and separation of state and party, on the other, undermine these two experiments.

Kuwait is yet to act on Amiri promises to increase political freedoms and participation. External variables are at play too. Newly-unified Yemen seems to be on the precipice of a democratic transformation. Neighbouring Saudi Arabia has the means of derailing Yemen's democratic evolution. Recent Saudi territorial claims deep into Yemen is seen in Sana as symptomatic of the royal conservatives' fear of a possible spill-over from democratized Yemen. Still worse are the cosmetic elections and proclamations of multi-partysim as in Iraq and Syria.

A few observations are in order with regard to Arab liberalization initiatives.

1. They do not alter the status quo. The growth of the state and its monopoly by the ruling elites ensures continuity of their control. Guided democracy is a coping mechanism that, coupled with the security apparatus, will keep serious challenges and threats in check, without necessarily enhancing the rulers' legitimacy.
2. The retrogressive nature of Arab democratization, especially the exclusion of Islamists, accounts for the rising levels of mutual violence between state and citizens. Egypt and Algeria are prime examples.



3. Elections are good only if they endorse the existing political order and its rulers. Again, Algeria is a good example.

For many Arabs the quest for Arab democracy is essential to the various forms of liberation (e.g. social, economic and political) they have to achieve as the world they live in becomes increasingly democratized and the contrast between Arab and other nationals becomes wider. Like winning liberation from European colonialism, winning it from authoritarianism will be challenging. Within the bounds of the current democratic stirrings, despite inherent retrogression in them, optimism about a future Fourth Wave of Arab democracy is justified.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 **Hudson, M.**, "State, Society, and Legitimacy: An Essay on Arab Political Prospects in the 1990s", in **Sharabi, H.** (ed.), *The Next Arab Decade*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1988, p. 22. See also by the same author, "After The Gulf War: Prospects For Democratization in The Arab World", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 45, no. 3, summer 1991, pp. 407-426, and "Democratization and the Problem of Legitimacy in Middle East Politics", his 1987 presidential address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association in Baltimore, published in *MESA Bulletin*, no. 22, 1988.
- 2 **Huntington, S.P.**, "How Countries Democratize", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 106, no. 4, 1991-92, pp. 579-616.
- 3 For accounts of privatization in Iraq, Syria and Tunisia see "Liberalisation economique en Syrie et en Irak", and "Privatisation et developement en Tunisie", in *Maghreb-Machrek*, no. 128, April-June, 1990.
- 4 The tribal nature of Mauritania's nascent democratization was visible in the parliamentary elections of February 1992. For details see *Al-Hayat*, February 28, 1992. See also "Mauritania: Democracy in Doubt", *Africa Report*, vol. 37, no. 3, May-June 1992, pp. 58-60.
- 5 Author's interview with **Saad Eddin Ibrahim**, Ibn Khaldoun Centre for Developmental Studies, March 29, Cairo.
- 6 Since its independence in 1956, Morocco has either amended its constitution or adopted a new one, usually by way of referendum, in 1962, 1970 and 1972 and, most recently, on September 4th, this year.
- 7 **Al-Sayyid M.K.**, "Slow Thaw in the Arab World", *World Policy Journal*, vol. viii, no. 4, Fall 1991, pp. 711-737.
- 8 For accounts of this Algerian financial scandal (similar ones in the Arab world are not rare but investigating them and bringing the culprits to justice is indeed rare) see *Al-Hayat*, March 23, 1992, and *Jeune Afrique*, May 20, 1992.
- 9 For a critique of Morocco's dicing with democracy see, "La democratie, c'est moi", in *Jeune Afrique*, September 2, 1992, pp. 4-7.
- 10 Author's interview in Cairo with **Mohammed El-Said Said**, Head of the Arab Affairs Unit, Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, March 28, 1992. Dr. Said used the Arabic term "*al-taqahqur al-dimuqrati*", to describe democratic retrogression in parts of the Arab world. Acknowledgement is due to him for both inspiring and encouraging me to investigate this aspect of Arab politics.
- 11 This term derives from the Arab name for bread which is *khobz* and is used here to describe a large segment of the Arab populace whose only creed is bread and survival. *Khobzists* are largely apolitical and remain so for as long as their livelihoods are not threatened. IMF austerity measures that did away with government subsidies of bare essentials (bread, flour, sugar, tea, coffe, kerosene) in

some Arab countries did, in the past, galvanize them into protest. Politically *khobzists* are up for grabs. Islamists with their charity networks and activities find many recruits amongst *khobzists*.

- 12 *Hit* is the slang variation of *hait* which is the Arab word for wall. In the Maghrib that term *hittist* is used in popular circles to describe the many thousands of school leavers and unskilled, and increasingly skilled, workers who are unemployed and whose only occupation is to sit or stand by the wall. Many of the *khobzists* are *hittists* and vice versa. However, *hittists* are mostly urban dwellers, younger, more ambitious and thus more frustrated and politicized. This is an area where no study, to my knowledge, has been undertaken and thus these distinctions remain both speculative and tentative. In the course of researching my doctoral thesis on Islamism, I shall be looking into these points.
- 13 See "The October Working Paper", chapter 9, in Carpozi, G., *A Man of Peace*, Anwar Sadat, Manor Books, New York, 1979.
- 14 For full details of the speech see "La declaration de Ben Ali a la Radio", *Jeune Afrique*, November 18, 1987, p. 42.
- 15 See, for instance, "Sudan's Islamic regime cultivates ties with Iran", *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 10-16, 1992.
- 16 A good account of Saudi Arabia's funding of Islamists can be found in "Islam, les financiers de l'integrisme", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, July 19-25, 1990, pp. 4-8.
- 17 See, for instance, "Tunisia faces renewed threat from Islamic fundamentalists", *The Washington Post*, January 11, 1992.
- 18 *MEED*, June 19, 1992, p. 5.
- 19 "Mitterand contre les islamistes", *Jeune Afrique*, July 23, 1992, pp. 16-18.
- 20 In June this year the head of Kuwait's transitional National Council, Aziz Masaeed, accused the U.S. Ambassador, Edward Gneham, of meddling in the emirate's internal affairs by talking about democracy. For more details see, *The Washington Post*, June 5 and June 6, 1992.
- 21 At this stage, it is very hard to assess Chadli's full role in the democratization process. The death of information makes this task very hard. Chadli has apparently attributed the legalization of the FIS to Kasdi Merbah, his Prime Minister in 1989. See *Jeune Afrique*, July 24, 1990.
- 22 Huntington's terminology.
- 23 "On democracy in Saudi Arabia", *Civil Society*, no. 3, March 1992, pp. 2-4. (This journal is a monthly in both Arabic and English and began to appear in January this year. Its founder is the director of the Cairo-based Ibn Khaldoun Centre, Saad Eddin Ibrahim. The journal deals specifically with the questions of democratization and the civil society in the Arab World). For more on the Saudi reforms see "Too little and 32 years late", in *The Nation*, April 13, 1992.
- 24 For a revealing article on the divisions within the Saudi clergy, on the one hand, and between the Saudi rulers and the conservative faction of the *ulema*, especially after the second Gulf war, on the other, see *Al-Yasar*, no. 25, March 1992, pp. 50-51.

- 25 *In the New York Times*, may 17, 1992. For further appraisal of the reforms see also, "Saudi Arabia's political reforms fall short", *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 17, 1992.
- 26 *MEED*, March 6, 1992.
- 27 *In Al Ousbou Al Arabi*, no. 1703, June 1, 1992.
- 28 These trials give one a strong sense of *deja vu*. For comparison with the almost identical trials of Islamists just months before the end of Bourguiba's rule see, "Bourguiba contre les islamistes", *Jeune Afrique*, September 30, 1987.
- 29 "Algerian election results pose threat for Tunisia", *The Washington Post*, January 11, 1992, p. A20.
- 30 "Les membres des commandos du sacrifice sont juges a leur tour", *Le Monde*, July 13, 1992, p. 5. For details of court verdicts of Islamists in both Algeria and Tunisia see respectively, *Le Monde*, July 16, 1992, and *Jeune Afrique*, September 9, 1992. Note, for instance, how in both countries no death penalty was delivered, although in Algeria, in May this year, the military court in Ourgla handed down 13 death sentences against Islamists convicted of acts of violence.
- 31 Is there such a thing as benevolent authoritarianism? It is a western framework for apologetism. In the 1980s, for instance, Jeanne Kirkpatrick made the distinction between "bad" and "good" dictators very fashionable. There was also the distinction between "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" regimes. This latter distinction was based on a purely economic rationale with little or no concern about the people who live under such regimes. For more details on this point see, Chomsky, N., *Towards a New Cold War*, Sinclair Browne Ltd., London, 1982.
- 32 See Al-Khalil, S., *Republic of Fear*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989.
- 33 *Le Monde*, June 16, 1992.
- 34 The Tunisian regime, like those of both Algeria and Morocco, has its own Human Rights watchdog. The deteriorating situation in human rights, especially the question of "deaths" (murders) in custody, has forced the regime to set up a special inquiry into torture in police stations and prisons. Accounts of the so-called "Driss Report" can be found in *Jeune Afrique*, August 12, 1992.
- 35 See *The Washington Post*, June 1, 1992.
- 36 See *Amnesty International* document marked "Urgent Action": "Death In Custody, Tunisia" Faisal Barakat", March 4, 1992. This is a follow-up to an earlier release on October 21, 1991.
- 37 See "Tunisia: Prolonged Incommunicado Detention and Torture", *Amnesty International*, March 1992. "Egypt: Security Police Detentions Undermine the Rule of Law", *Amnesty International*, January 1992.
- 38 "Tunisia: Thousands held illegally, torture routine in crackdown on Islamic Opposition", *Amnesty International*, March 4, 1992. Al-Nahdha itself claims that more than 25,000 of its members have been arrested. See *The Washington Post*, January 11, 1992.
- 39 "La guerre du present Ben Ali", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 21-27, 1990, pp. 42-43. See also *Amnesty International*, Report 1991, pp. 227-28.
- 40 "Draconian Powers", *Middle East International*, no. 430. July 24, 1992, p. 11.

- 41 "Les islamistes en enfer", *Jeune Afrique*, July 9, 1991; "Tunisie: la democratie contre les islamistes", *Jeune Afrique*, August 5, 1992; "Algeria clamps down harder on Muslim militants", *The New York Times*, February 10, 1992; "Egypt: struggle against extremists", *Middle East International*, March 20, 1992.
- 42 Ibrahim, S., "The Future of Human Rights in the Arab World", in Sharabi, op. cit., p. 41.
- 43 See the Algerian example in "La guerre des imams", *Jeune Afrique*, July 23, 1991, p. 21.
- 44 See "Moubarak, un rais pas comme les autres", *Jeune Afrique*, March 9, 1988, p. 65. In the same article it is reported that Sadat was once nicknamed the "black donkey", whereas president Mubarak was known as "the laughing cow".
- 45 Bourguiba was no stranger to controversy. In 1965 he enraged Nasserists when he called for dialogue with Israel on the basis of the UN 242 resolution. In the seventies he aroused the ire of Islamists with his daring reasoning. The text (in Arabic) of the Saudi Mufti, Abdu al-Aziz Ibn Bazz, in which he retorts to Bourguiba, is entitled *Hukmua al-Islam* (the ruling of Islam), The Islamic University Publications, Medina, Saudi Arabia, 1401 (higra), 1980.
- 46 "Amir upholds women's rights", *Kuwait Times*, February 16, 1992, p. 1. See also the Kuwait Crown Prince's assurances of the emirate's return to democracy in, *Al-Seyassah*, February 26, 1992, p. 1.
- 47 The Islamic Constitutional Movement and the Salafayeen secured, between them and their allies, 20 seats. *Shi'ite* groups won 4 seats, which is unprecedented. It is estimated that these groups along with the secular liberal and independent opposition, will command 32 out of the Assembly's 50 seats. This is expected to make for a vigorous parliament. However, not all members of the Islamic bloc will support legislation regarding women's rights. These groups, given Kuwait's interwoven family and entrepreneurial networks, cannot be regarded as an opposition bloc in its western liberal sense.
48. "Kuwait: Election Law Unconstitutional", Reuters News Service, *Reuters Textline*, December 5, 1991.
49. "Kuwait: Pro-democracy Reformer Demands Abolition of Two-tier Citizenship", Reuters News Service, *Reuters Textline*, January 24, 1992.

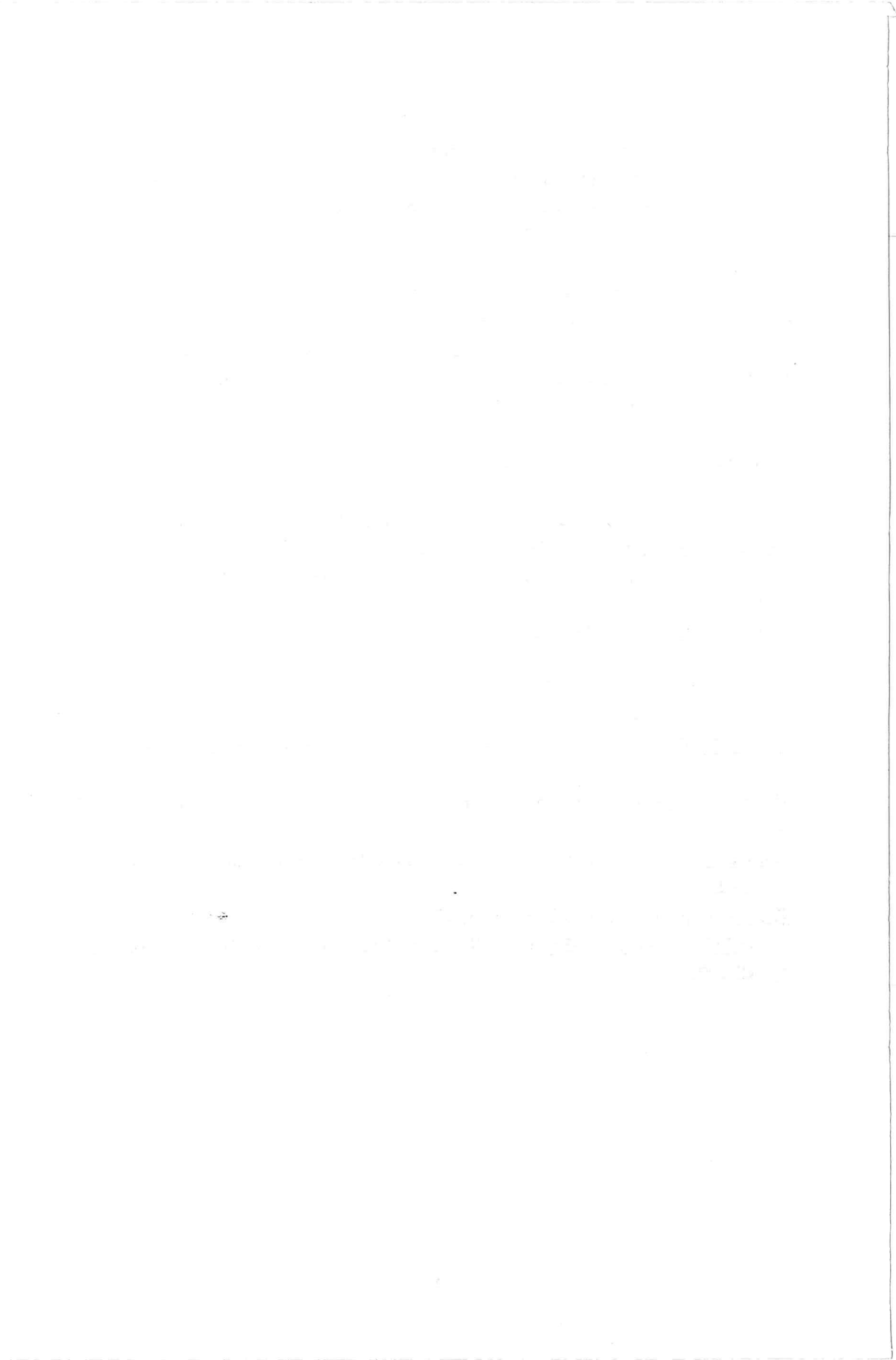


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