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Change and democratisation in the Arab world: the role of political parties

AS' AD ABUKHALIL

Introduction

The recent elections in Kuwait and Lebanon indicate that Arab political events can no longer be reduced to violent overthrow of governments, *coups d''etat*, assassinations and royal family feuds. Democratic elections, often marred with irregularities and/or partial under-representativeness, reflect popular choices, even if they do not conform with the interests and wishes of ruling elites. Those elections, however, tend to express an expanded role of the public sphere, which has been limited—if not eliminated—ever since autocratic rule came into being in the Middle East.

There is a wide interest in the universal trends of democratisation and in the various schools of democratic theory.[1] Governments and peoples have been taking notice of the radical political changes that have swept much of Central and Eastern Europe in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the coverage of democratisation in Europe is still influenced by the legacy of the Cold War; it is almost automatically assumed that all the governments that succeeded communism are good, and all the sins of post-communist regimes are easily forgiven by Western governments. It is ironic that the Bush and Clinton administrations have hailed Yeltsin as a democrat even when scenes of Russian oppression, either of elected parliamentarians or of Chechnya, are watched by viewers throughout the world. Yet, while democratisation is being cheered in former communist countries, democratisation in the Arab World and Africa proceeds unnoticed in the USA.[2] It could be that traditional images and stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims are so deeply engraved in the minds of people in the West that the notion of democracy among Arabs and Muslims is still—for many—unthinkable.

The only references made by government officials in the USA about the Middle East have to do with the Middle East peace process (expressed almost always in terms of the security of Israel) and the spectre of Islamic terrorism, which has caused the President of the USA to take legal action against fund-raising activities by groups and organisations that are loosely suspected of aiding terrorists. All Palestinian organisations (including, oddly, Marxist–Leninist organisations that are lumped together with Islamic fundamentalist

As' ad AbuKhalil is Assistant Professor at the Department of Politics, California State University, Stanislaus, 801 West Monte Vista Avenue, Turlock, CA 95382, USA, He is also Research Fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, USA.

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organisations), with the exception of Yasir 'Arafat's Fatah movement, are now prohibited by law from engaging in any fund-raising activities on US territories. Of course, this concern with the issue of fund raising stems from the belief that violence and opposition in the Middle East are all orchestrated by a worldwide conspiracy hatched—depending on the decade—either by the (former) USSR or Iran. The realities of the Middle East are still obscured behind layers of ignorance about it, by people in the media and by people in government.

The tide has been turning in favour of democratisation for sometime in the Arab world.[3] In fact, it could be argued that post-independence regimes were aware of popular desires for freedom back in the 1950s when new regimes and political parties were promoting their own ideological visions. Not that those regimes and parties satisfied in any way the desires and aspirations of the people. Far from that, Jamal 'Abd-un-Nasir, for example, knowing the centrality of the notion of freedom among his audience, equated legal independence with freedom. 'Freedom' of the nation superseded individual freedoms which were seen as bourgeois values meant to perpetuate the rule of the capitalist elite. The ability of regimes to distort the meanings of freedom, democracy, and equality was not a result of the naiveté of the public but of brute force utilised by the various governments to impose their will, and their definitions.

To note the presence of a process of democratisation in the Arab world is not to claim that the political apparatuses of power in the region have transformed overnight into representative bodies. Furthermore, strong Arab/Islamic, apologist temptations can lead one to dismiss the differences between Middle Eastern political systems and their counterparts in the West as the product of different historical and cultural factors. According to this formula, traditional, informal bodies are equated with democratic-style parliaments: 'The existence of an informal assembly (the *majlis*) in the traditional Arab world enabled individuals from all walks of life to approach their leaders directly and personally for assistance and aid.'[4] This image of Middle Eastern people with unrestricted access to their leaders was fashioned by the literary influence of *Arabian Nights*. It is not true that leaders allowed people access without regard to a person's wealth and social status, and it is also untrue that a fixation with security was not uppermost in leaders' minds since at least the eighth century, when the architecture of the newly founded city of Baghdad was designed with the aim of providing maximum security for the residence of the caliph. Moreover, the access that people had to their leaders did not deal with political aspirations and matters of power sharing. The equation of *majlis* with parliaments, which may please those Middle Eastern leaders who are eager to prove their democratic credentials to the West, only distorts the real legitimising function of the various instruments of power.

It could also be argued that democratisation of the Arab world is a potentially dangerous project from the standpoint of US foreign policy. The interests of the USA would be harmed by a situation of political reform in a country like Saudi Arabia, where the royal family has been instrumental in providing the West with the necessary predictability in oil production and pricing. Radical political and economic change in the Arab would alter not only relations between regimes and peoples in the region but also between ruling groups and the world at large. This

has meant that the USA can only afford to call for democratisation in countries that are harshly critical of its foreign policy and economic interests. Blanket support for democracy and human rights could undermine the powers of pro-US regimes.

General characteristics of party politics in the present-day Arab world

The study of political parties in the Arab world has been neglected for a long time. It was assumed that no modern, Western-style political parties existed in the Middle East with the exception of Israel, which—through the prism of Western scholarship—was seen as a glorified extension of the West. But even if parties in the Middle East do not manifest the same features as parties in the West, and even if most of them operate under political and military stresses, they still warrant study as examples of political behaviour, either by the regimes or by the public.[5] Democratisation in the Middle East, as limited as it remains in places like Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon and Egypt, reflects an increasing role for political parties, which have represented political interests independent—and in many cases divergent—from that of the central governments.

The origins of political parties in the Middle East go back to the seventh century, when schisms within Islam began to emerge.[6] Even though those parties lacked some attributes of modern political parties in Western Europe and the USA, they clearly contained some important elements that characterise modern political parties. If one uses the characteristics of political parties used by LaPalombara and Weiner,[7] it becomes clear that some of the political movements of early Islam were not the religious movements that they were—and still are—considered to be. Early sects within Islam, including that of Shiite Islam, started as a movement seeking not only a change of policy by the ruling group, but the seizure of power itself. And although the movement was centred on the leadership of ʿAli, it continued long after his death. The later theological characteristics of Shiite Islam were intended to distinguish the movement sharply from its rival, Sunni, version of Islam. Similarly, the Kharijites enjoyed all the characteristics of political parties, if a party is understood to mean 'an association that activates and mobilizes the people, represents interests, provides for compromise among competing points of view, and becomes the proving ground for political leadership'.[8]

The roles of political parties and movements in the Middle East did not diminish because of an inhibiting cultural environment, but because of repressive political conditions. The Ottoman empire, for example, stifled political activities and endorsed only one version of truth, and one authorised political line, not different from the certainty of truth contained in Plato's theory of the Forms. The *millet* system, which recognised juridicially the cultural, social and religious autonomy of the various sects living within the empire in matters of personal status laws, encouraged—and in fact insisted on—the assumption of representative responsibilities by the clerical establishments within the various sects. This later blurred the lines between nationhood and sectarian consciousness, which explains why the word *milli* in Persian and Turkish means 'national'.

The notion of *ummah*, as an all-encompassing community of believers, could

be seen as one that is incompatible with the requirements for pluralistic political institutions. But despite Quranic references to the *ummah*, and despite the desires and wishes of ordinary Muslims, the Muslims were never unified, not even during the reign of Muhammad. Civil war, known in Arabic as *al-fitnah al-kubrah* (the Great Sedition), broke out among Muslims in the wake of Muhammad's death. Islamic history bears witness to the inability—and unwillingness—of Muslims to agree on matters relating to faith and government. Orientalists, and Muslim wishful thinkers, have been presenting an image of Muslims united against everybody else,[9] while Muslims have been at war against one another perhaps more than they have been against non-Muslims.

Tracing original roots of party politics in Islamic/Arab history remains outside the scope of this paper. It was this century that introduced Western-style political parties into the region. The colonial—and semi-colonial—period witnessed the rise of political parties as new voices of political expression. They were intended, by some colonial authorities, not as a supplement to traditional leaderships of families, tribes and clerics, but perhaps as a possibly useful alternative.[10] Far from that, modern party politics did not replace old, traditional forms of leadership and organisations. In the language of James Bill and Robert Springborg,[11] the informal groups in Arab society penetrated and dominated the formal groups, including modern political parties.

Many forms of informal groups, like the family, tribe, sect and the clique, have shaped, and in many cases helped produce, political parties. When political parties emerged among the Palestinians in the 1930s, it was not the result of dramatic change in the forms of political representation and organisation. Instead, traditional Palestinian families, especially the rival families of Al-Husayni and An-Nashashibi, formed their own political parties to 'modernise' their tools of political organisations.[12] Similarly, notable families in Syria also came to influence party politics in that country in the first half of this century.[13] And in Lebanon, each individual *zaim* felt the need as early as the 1950s to found his own political party, and this has not changed in the post-civil war era, assuming of course that the civil war is over.[14] That the traditional leadership felt compelled to form political parties to respond to the needs of the constituencies indicates that public expectations could no longer be fulfilled through the old, purely informal vehicles.

But the picture of Arab political parties can not be drawn with sharp strokes. Many political parties were—and still are—a combination of informal and formal grouping. The Phalange Party in Lebanon, for example, was created originally as a quasi-fascist party dedicated to an ultra-national ideology. It later developed under the leadership of its founder Pierre Gemayyel as a tool for political control by the Gemayyel family. After the death of its founder, Amin Gemayyel (son of Pierre) could not control the party any longer, but the loss of the family hegemony weakened the party.[15] In Iraq, the Bath party was transformed by Saddam Hussein from a party with rival factions and wings into an iron-disciplined political party controlled by him personally. Debates and disagreements within the party were strictly forbidden.[16]

Another feature of party politics in the Arab world deals with personalism in politics. Despite the advances in articulating their interests and the propagation

of messages by political parties, people in many countries still respond more immediately to personalities than to issues and abstract ideas. This is not unique to the Middle East region. In election times in the USA, abstract ideas are often reduced to electronic sound bites and images of personalities. The recent presidential campaign in the USA has been largely fought over the airwaves, through the use of symbols, images and codes. Each candidate tried to project charisma while issues included school uniforms, the V-chip in TV sets and curfews for teenagers. In the Arab world, the absence of democracy has not instilled the idea of the effectiveness of popular sovereignty. Not that people in the Middle East enjoy being ruled by dictators, as is often maintained by some non-Arabs about Arabs,[17] but the absolutist political systems marginalise the individual and convince her/him that one is helpless *vis-à-vis* political change. It is not unreasonable for the people of Iraq to feel powerless and impotent given the powers of one, unelected man who rules over millions of people. The monopolisation of power by one individual over a long period of time can sometimes instill in the public the wisdom of the dictum of 'the one man, the sole undisputed leader (to use the Orwellian language of modern Iraqi political terminology) who alone will deliver salvation'. This idea, of course, is not inconsistent with the messianic beliefs of Shiites, who still eagerly anticipate the 'return of the awaited rightly-guided one'. The anticipation of the return of the 'messiah' can be found in the religiously minded segment of every population, West and East.

This relates at least partly to what Nietzsche calls 'slave morality',[18] which remains powerful in the political cultures of different communities. Suffering and toleration of misery are championed to rationalise the rule of the elite and to justify one's inferior status in society and polity. Belief in one's ability to bring about necessary change weakens as anticipation of the miraculous grows.

As people believe that individuals as a collective are weak and helpless, belief in the 'one man' grows. And too much faith is often put in this 'one man' to rescue the people from their misery. What else could explain the firm belief expressed by millions of Arabs in this century that Jamal ʿAbd-un-Nasir was the one who was not only going to liberate Palestine but also was going to achieve social justice for all. The spell of charismatic leadership is universal but too many uncharismatic leaders dominate governments and political parties in the Middle East. The communist party of Syria has been dominated since its creation by the late leader Khalid Bakdash,[19] who belatedly delegated some of his powers to his wife Wisal Farhah. And the history of the Syrian Social National Party can not be divorced from the dictatorial leadership of its founder, Antun Saadah, who fashioned himself and his party after classic fascist leaders and movements.[20] His party continued the 'worship' of his person long after his death.

The best evidence for the phenomenon of hero worship in Arab political parties—of the left, right and centre—is revealed in the peculiar titles that leaders of those parties carry, whether *ar-rayyis* for Nasir, *az-zaʿim* for Saadah, *al-ʿustadh* for Michel ʿAflaq. And whether known as *ʿamirs* or *murshids* in the various Islamic fundamentalist groups, *hakim* in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, *khityar* in the Fatah Movement, not to mention 'secretary-general' in numerous communist and Nasserist parties throughout the

region, in each case one man dominates the party. While those parties differ in terms of ideology and goals, they seem to have striking similarities in their rigid organisational structures as well as in their undemocratic party regulations and procedures. Collective leadership is rarely practised, even in the small organisations of the left and of the fundamentalists. The overwhelming domination of one man over the affairs of the party has increasingly discouraged people from taking party membership seriously. To be sure, there are still popular organisations in the Arab world but they are now largely confined to the world of Islamic fundamentalism. In this world, the leader is followed on the basis of a belief in his wise and righteous interpretations of Islamic laws. The Fatah movement remains popular, although resentment against the monopolisation of decision-making powers by Yasir 'Arafat is wide throughout the movement, which has prevented the Central Committee of the movement from holding a meeting for several months.[21] But splinter movements and corrective tendencies (widely used names for offshoots and schismatic splits within organisations) within parties often develop under the leadership of one man. Thus, when the DFLP was formed it was the product of Nayif Hawatimah's differences with George Habash of the PFLP, and Jibril was the man behind the PFLP-General Command.

Arab discourse on the Arab–Israeli conflict, which was an art form under Nasir, facilitated the resistance to democratisation within countries and within political parties. It rationalised the so-called need for a state of vigilance against the enemies of the Arabs. This led to a state of emergency being imposed in most Arab countries, particularly in those countries bordering Israel. Their physical proximity to Israel, even in a country like Lebanon which has historically tried to insulate itself as much as possible from the responsibilities and consequences of the Arab–Israeli conflict, allowed them to exploit the protracted conflict in order to impose severe political and economic measures, all in the name of 'liberating Palestine'. For example, a state of emergency is still imposed in Egypt, which was the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel. More surprisingly, the Arab Organization for Human Rights indicated in its charter that it understands the need for 'states of emergency' given the nature of the conflict between the Arabs and the Israelis.

'Abd-un-Nasir expressed the sentiments of Arab regimes best when he coined the slogan 'No voice shall rise above the voice of the battle'. Ironically, this slogan was formulated in the wake of the humiliating defeat of Egypt in 1967. He wanted to extend the era of authoritarian rule despite the embarrassing performance of his army in the war. Similarly, since contemporary Arab political parties use the Palestinian question for legitimisation purposes, democratic life within these parties is prevented because only the leadership has the necessary information about 'the conspiracies being hatched against the Arab nation', to quote one of the most oft-used excuses in Arab political terminology. Not only did the longevity of the Arab–Israeli conflict allow Arab regimes to justify the imposition of emergency laws—ie oppressive laws, regulations and practices—but it also justified the exorbitant expenditure on the military in all Arab countries, including in those that have not participated in the series of Arab–Israeli wars. Table 1 indicates that Middle Eastern countries are some of the most generous spenders on military affairs.[22]

TABLE 1
Cost and size of military in select Middle Eastern countries

Country	*Defence Expenditure/GDP (%)*	*Armed forces per population*
Algeria	2.0	0.80
Egypt	11.0	1.00
Iraq	51.0	5.50
Israel	17.0	3.50
Jordan	11.4	2.10
Saudi Arabia	19.0	0.70
Syria	18.0	3.90

Public interest in the plight of the Palestinians, especially before the 1967 defeat, focused the attention of the region on developments in Arab–Israeli affairs, and belittled the importance of political developments. Promises were made to the effect that the defeat of Israel would bring about prosperity and freedom for everybody. In that sense, Arab popular interest in the affairs of the Palestinians stemmed from an association in the public mind between the resolution of the Palestinian problem and the general welfare of the masses in the region. To help the Palestinians was to help oneself, so argued the propaganda claims of Arab regimes. The success of Sadat in going against this line of thought (of course, his success should be qualified with a reminder of the way he died—by assassination), was the result of his attempt to convince ordinary Egyptians that their welfare resided in ending the state of war with Israel.

The renewed role of political parties in Arab politics

Reference to the renewed role of political parties in Arab politics includes the roles of ruling parties. A distinction should be made in this regard between ruling parties, those that are created to establish legitimacy and popular mobilisation of the masses, and those political parties that operate either in the open or in the underground against the government or the established order. This distinction may help one in understanding the difference between parties with legitimacy and parties without legitimacy. It could be said that popular disillusionment with ruling parties—and their ideologies—allowed opposition parties to present themselves as the alternative. Of course, those parties have had varying degrees of credibility and appeal, depending not only on the public mood of the masses but also on the characteristics of their leadership at a particular point in history. Nasir, for example, increased the appeal of Arab nationalism while Saddam Hussein, among others, discredited the idea. Khalid Bakdash was perhaps harmful to the cause of Syrian (and Lebanese) communism because of his intolerance of dissent and his blind obedience to Stalinist Marxist–Leninism.

While the image of the Arab world in the West still resides in the old clichés of Oriental despotism and Islamic attraction to autocracy, there is evidence that

the Arab people have not been willingly accepting the dominance of the oppressive governments under which they live and suffer. To be sure, only apologists of Arab governments would claim that the obstacles to democracy in the region are all external or regime-induced. There are serious cultural, economic and religious impediments to democracy in all societies, not excluding western democracies. The Middle East has to deal with the legacy of the historical marriage between the political establishment and the religious establishment. Both establishments have now been discredited, but to the benefit of a new clerical counter-elite which does not necessarily further the cause of democracy and pluralism, and which does not further the cause of the expansion of the public sphere.

Nonetheless, political parties can be active and effective in non-democratic contexts. The example of Weimar Germany is a case in point. Similarly, to emphasise the increasing role of political parties in the Middle East is not to expect inevitable democratisation in those countries where political parties have been active, and is not to expect the political parties themselves to lead the process of democratisation, although they remain its main beneficiaries. Sometimes political parties are briefly tolerated to add legitimacy to a certain regime, especially in transitional periods. It took the Egyptian revolutionary regime a couple of years before it decided to ban political parties altogether, as was the case with the Communist Revolution in Russia. The 1968 Bathist coup in Iraq initially allowed political parties to operate only to ban them several years later. Khomeini also used the multiplicity of political parties in Iran to his own advantage in the early phase of the revolution, although he later banned all of them when the regime felt secure enough to monopolise all political representation and leadership. Gaddafi of Libya, on the other hand, coined the slogan 'He who joins a party betrays the homeland' very early in his rule.[23]

Another factor that explains the increasing role of political parties in the region stems from the ideological diversity that characterises the political culture of the Arab world. It is too easy—and quite inaccurate—to maintain that Arab political culture is entirely derived from its Islamic heritage or from the ill defined tradition of Oriental despotism. In all countries where democratisation has occurred in the past few years, the political opening produced a relatively large number of political parties vying for political power. There are now some 23 legal political parties in the small country of Jordan,[24] and legal restrictions prohibit the increase of the number of political parties in Egypt. Lebanon continues to have at least 100—legal and underground—political parties, and Algeria witnessed a rise in the number of registered political parties before the military *coup d"etat* in 1992 which ended the process of democratisation.

The multiplicity of political parties, albeit with different political weights, reflects the range of ideological preferences of the people. While the fundamentalists remain the single most popular political force in general, there is still a presence for leftist and nationalist parties in those countries where parties are allowed. Furthermore, Green parties or environmental associations have now been formed and legalised in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon.[25] The issues about which the voters care often transcend the dogmas of religio-political parties. And even people who sympathise with Islamic

fundamentalist thought are not entirely satisfied with only one political party espousing the cause. One finds that at least 10 different political organisations and parties carry the mantle of Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. To be sure, there are dominant political parties—or fronts—in some Arab countries, like the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut) in Algeria. But some of these movements, like the FIS, comprise different factions and strands within their own structures. It is doubtful that one monolithic party will lead the process of thorough political transformation once the political system opens up completely.

The ideological diversity in the Arab world is not new. While many of the classical orientalists have presented Islamic history in terms of an all-encompassing 'Islam' with no dissent and opposition, the reality of Islamic history was filled with sedition, civil wars and constant opposition. Since the time of the Prophet, there have been people and groups who questioned not only the decisions that Muhammad made but also his very claims to prophethood. Dissent continued after Muhammad's victory in Medina, and certainly long after his death. The existence of numerous Islamic sects and their uneasy survival attests—not necessarily to the tolerance of the rulers, who were rarely tolerant of anti-conformism—but to the political, ideological and religious dissatisfaction among the people. Even among Sunni Muslims, the artificial unity of their ranks soon gave room for the different jurisprudential schools of thought that became indistinguishable from sects.

In the modern Middle East, the relative political openness that existed under clear constraints in pre-independence times in Iraq and Egypt under the British, and in Lebanon and Syria under the French, produced a scene of party politics that strayed from the stereotypical image of the one, undisputed party. In Iraq, the communists were at odds with nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists, and the political parties in Syria and Lebanon also clashed over matters of policy. The rise of fundamentalists today should not obscure the existence of 'other political parties' even if those parties are smaller in size and weaker in effectiveness than the fundamentalists. In the Gaza strip, a region that is increasingly reduced in the news to the activities of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Palestinian communist organisations remain active and vocal. The often succeed through their own vehicles of civil groups and professional associations in influencing public discourse and setting the national agenda. The elder statesman of Gaza, Haydar 'Abdul-Shafi, is himself identified with the Palestinian left. It is unlikely that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism will put an end to the multiplicity of political parties unless the fundamentalists win an election and then decide to ban party activities altogether. The prospects of free party politics under Islamic fundamentalist rule does not look promising given the distrust that fundamentalist leaders express towards any facets of western democratic life, and given their tendency to dismiss their enemies as 'infidels' and/or 'traitors'.

There are also some other less apparent reasons for the increasing role of political parties in the Arab world. The education revolution in the Middle East and success in slowly raising the literacy rates among females (despite the preservation of the gap between male and female literacy rates in all Arab countries) have increased expectations for modern means of political expression and representation in most Arab countries. No longer will a large section of the

TABLE 2
Literacy rates in the Arab world, 1990 (%)

Country	*Female*	*Male*
Bahrain	69	82
Iraq	49	70
Jordan	70	89
Kuwait	67	77
Lebanon	73	88
Saudi Arabia	48	73
Syria	51	78
Yemen	26	53

Arab population allow traditional family and tribal leaders—many of whom have been increasingly marginalised over the years—to articulate political interests and demands. Table 2 shows some figures of literacy rates for some Arab countries.[26]

Political parties have allowed members of the educated, urban middle and lower middle class to organise themselves away from those political associations that have been under the dominance of the rural and/or urban elites. And Islamic fundamentalist and communist political parties have succeeded in undermining the dominance of political families that still have crucial roles among ruling political groups. Political parties for the middle class, since the days of the Istiqlal Party among the Palestinians in the 1930s, represent a rebellion against the hegemonic influence of 'the prominent families'. One cannot say, however, that the roles of 'prominent families' have been completely eliminated; those families often draw support from state apparatus and traditional value systems.

Constraints on the role of political parties

The presence of political parties on the Arab political scene does not necessarily mean that change will be undertaken only—or even primarily—by them. The fear of one-party dominance, a dominance that has brought about tragic results in Syria and Iraq, among others, will continue to contribute to a measure of political pluralism once the hand of repressive, absolutist government is partially or completely lifted. Even if the fundamentalists seize power in one or more Arab country, it is unlikely that the populace will tolerate a crackdown against free political associations. But political parties have to face their own record, which does not leave many people comfortable with their ability to lead the process of democratisation.

Political parties in the Arab world have not been accustomed to a life of free political expression and association. Many of these parties exhibit a low level of tolerance within their own ranks and also of each other. The undemocratic structures of these parties is revealed in the numerous schisms that tore at the heart of most—if not all—of the well established political parties, like the Bath, the communists, the Nasserists and the fundamentalists. Leadership of all contemporary Arab political parties has been unwilling to allow collective

leadership and participation of rank-and-file members in decision making. Criticism of the leadership and its decisions has been equated with unacceptable betrayal of party principles. The political climate of the Arab–Israeli conflict has also encouraged party leaders to dismiss their rivals and enemies in other parties and within their own parties as 'agents of imperialism and Zionism'. The weekly mouthpiece of the extremist Palestinian organisation Fatah-Revolutionary Council (led by Abu Nidal) often carries announcements of 'execution' of party members who were accused of working for 'the enemy'. Not all parties, of course, kill dissident members but tolerance of different viewpoints is quite rare in Arab political party life, perhaps reflecting the legacy of age old authoritarian and dictatorial rule.

While the credibility of political parties is weakened by virtue of their own stifling organisational structure, their effectiveness as vehicles for political change has been minimal over the last two decades. Arab oil money has succeeded in buying off the loyalty of formerly leftist members and leaders. Former Central Committee members of the Marxist–Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman now sit in the cabinet in the Sultanate of Oman. Similarly, some formerly bitter enemies of the Saudi or Jordanian states (like Ghazi Al-Qusaybi in Saudi Arabia or Kamil Abu Jabir in Jordan) are now supporters of the regime. Regimes were able to focus on key individuals within parties to lure them with money and official posts. As a result, some people have lost faith in the ability of political parties to deliver desirable political changes. Of course, governmental cooptation has not been a success story as far as Islamic fundamentalist organisations are concerned. In fact, these organisations have more credibility because their leaders and members are seen as more principled and more uncompromising than their counterparts in other secular and nationalist parties.

But the credibility problem of political parties raises questions about the identity of political forces that could lead the process of democratisation and thorough political transformation once the era of dictatorship begins to wither away. If the political parties of the Arab world are incapable of undertaking the leadership role of the process of democratic transformation, then other groups might play that role. The literature on civil society is beginning to attract the attention of scholars in the Middle East, especially since the search for theoretical paradigms has characterised the field of Middle Eastern politics for more than two decades, ever since modernisation theory was attacked from all sides.[27] Without getting into whether the civil society paradigm will prove useful when applied to Middle East studies,[28] the move away from the state and family is still needed.

The *problematique* of civil society in the Middle East, and the hazards of applying Western-originated ideas like Foucault's notion of the diffusion of power, reside in the temptation to belittle the overwhelming presence and influence of the state in the name of dispelling the Western fixation with the culture-based theories of Oriental despotism or Islamic autocracy. If civil society refers to the realm between the state and the family,[29] then civil society can shed light on areas formerly ignored in Middle Eastern studies. The works of Middle Eastern anthropologists, for example, have dispelled many misconceptions about

the roles of Arab women. The study of Arab politics will inevitably benefit from exploring those areas that succeeded in avoiding state control, small as they may be. Studies of the Middle East should also challenge the classical cliché about the family as the primary source of identification and loyalty. Not enough studies have been conducted on the dissolution of traditional family ties in light of the migration to the big cities from the countryside of millions of people in every Middle Eastern country.

Professional associations, like syndicates of lawyers, physicians, journalists, artists, university professors, and teachers may enjoy a credibility that political parties do not have anymore. Professional associations could be entrusted with the task of political transformation and democratisation because they appear less corrupt and rigidly organised than political parties. In all countries where democratisation—as a process—has begun, professional associations are asserting themselves. Whether in the Palestinian occupied territories, Lebanon, Jordan or Yemen, professional associations are often asked to arbitrate disputes and settle conflicts. They have emerged as the voice of the professional middle class, a voice that is not necessarily dominated by the state, as is the case in Egypt, where the regime has been trying to amend the law to diminish the independence and influence of professional associations. The Egyptian government has recently gone as far as passing special laws to reserve the right to interfere in the internal elections of professional associations and in the formulation of their internal rules. The associations were even prevented from protesting against anti-democratic laws.[30]

Women's organisations have also emerged in the countries cited, although Islamic fundamentalist organisations dismiss the priority of gender equality. But organised forums for women exist even within the bodies of Islamic fundamentalist organisations. Their ability to enact change to improve conditions for women in society is restricted by virtue of the male domination of political organisations and professional associations. But human rights organisations and feminist organisations are no longer willing to neglect the gender question until 'the land is liberated', as male national leaders are fond of saying.

The difficulties facing political parties, and the restrictions that apply to political activities everywhere in the Arab world, make it hard to predict the course of political change at the end of twentieth century. It is clear that change is in the making, but it is unclear how fundamental change will come about and what shape will the region take once political transformation settles in.

Conclusion

The shape of Arab politics is rapidly evolving thanks to regional and international changes and internal developments that have been accelerated since the end of the second Gulf war. Arab regimes are now more aware of popular dissatisfaction and the support by several Arab regimes for the US war campaign has only put more pressure on the ruling regimes. Symbolic and superficial changes have been introduced in most Arab countries. State-sponsored councils and committees have been sprouting at a rapid rate in many countries, including

in the Gulf region where identification with *Sharīah* was all that the regimes were willing to submit to.

Regular elections in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon have resulted in a changed political structure. It can be maintained that the influence of Islamic fundamentalism has been weakened in countries where relatively free elections have taken place. Only in Kuwait have the fundamentalists been able to bolster their support; any explanation of this phenomenon has to take into consideration the peculiar electoral laws in the country, where women are still denied voting rights. Women have not formed the backbone of Islamic fundamentalist organisations in any Arab country and they constitute the bulk of secular forces in Algeria, Jordan and Lebanon.

Another feature of recent events in the Middle East is the growing role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Ecological parties, human rights organisations, feminist networks and election monitoring groups have received added attention, perhaps because the picture of party politics still lacks credibility. Arab states have dominated political parties, either in their countries or in other countries, for too long. People are often suspicious of the motivations of party leaders and they often accuse them of loyalty to external forces. Furthermore, the rise of the Islamic fundamentalist movement, which often expresses hostility to traditional party organisations in the Arab world, has not increased the credibility of political parties.

It is not unlikely that the next few years will witness competition between traditional political parties (of the left, right and centre) and the professional associations concerned with human rights, feminism, ecology and development. The competition will intensify as some of those groups seek representation in parliament, as was the case in the recent parliamentary election in Lebanon. Within this context, political parties of the left and centre are now incorporating items and issues promoted by the popular NGOs. References to the environment and human rights now make their way into the programmes of official political parties. The changing discourse is unlikely to undermine the power base of the professional associations although it reflects a change in the discourse within the public sphere.

Finally, what is missing from the literature on democracy in the Middle East and North Africa is any critical assessment of the concept of democracy itself. Middle Eastern scholarship now accepts without hesitation the assumed virtues of Western democracy. That democracy is capable of resolving the acute social, economic and political problems of the Arab world is as questionable an assertion as the slogan 'Islam is the solution'. Events in Eastern and Central Europe illustrate the limitations of capitalist transformation and of democratisation. The former benefited Western economic interests, while the latter allowed wealthy elites to sing the praises of 'freedom', American style. The literature does not contain any linkage between social justice, which is essential for the long-term development of the region, and the path of democratisation. In light of the widening gap between the rich and poor in the Middle East, democratisation does not necessarily guarantee any positive change in the lives of the majority of Arabs. Similarly, voters in Central and Eastern Europe have been returning former communists to power as a result of their disillusionment with

Western democracy. This should not, of course, be interpreted as a call for the preservation of the status quo, which entails acts of violence and oppression against ordinary citizens, but it only raises questions about the wisdom of the tone of religious dogmatism in which Middle Eastern specialists invoke their calls for the democratisation of the region.

Notes

[1] See David Held, *Prospects for Democracy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993; and Held, *Models of Democracy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

[2] The best book on the subject is John Esposito & John Voll, *Islam and Democracy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

[3] See in this regard, Michael Hudson, 'After the Gulf War: prospects for democratization in the Arab world', *Middle East Journal*, 45(3), 1991 pp??; and John Esposito & James Piscatori, 'Democratisation and Islam', *Middle East Journal*, 45(3), Summer 1991.

[4] James Bill & Robert Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*, New York: HarperCollins, 1994, p 20.

[5] The first study of political parties in the Middle East came out in 1994. See Frank Tachau, ed, *Political Parties of the Middle East and North Africa*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.

[6] See Asad AbuKhalil, 'The study of political parties in the Arab world: the case of Lebanon', *Journal of Asian and African Affairs*, V(1), 1993. pp 49–61.

[7] See Joseph LaPalombara & Myron Weiner, eds, *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966.

[8] Roy Macridis, ed, *Political Parties: Contemporary Trends and Ideas*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967, p 9.

[9] This has been eloquently represented in the writings of the influential Orientalist Bernard Lewis.

[10] This does not mean, of course, that colonial powers fought traditional forms of organisation and loyalty. In many cases, colonial governments used the tribal and sectarian systems to their own advantage, especially when faced with the sophisticated political threat of effective political parties, like the communists in Iraq during the monarchist period.

[11] Bill & Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*, pp 91–98.

[12] See, for example, Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1929–1939: From Riots to Rebellion*, London: Frank Cass, 1977; Ann Mosely Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917–1939: The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979; and Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

[13] See Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism*, Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 1987.

[14] Asad Abukhalil, *The Politics of Sectarian Ethnicity: Segmentation and the Clash of Political Identities in Lebanon*, forthcoming.

[15] For a treatment of the prewar history of the Lebanese Phalange Party, see John Entelis, *Pluralism and Party Transformation in Lebanon: Al-Kataʾib, 1936–1970*, Leiden, the Netherlands: EJ Brill, 1975.

[16] Life in Iraq under Saddam Hussein is depicted in Samir Al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989.

[17] See David Pryce-Jones, *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs*, New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

[18] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

[19] On the domineering role of Bakdash, see Maxime Rodinson, *Marxisme et le Monde Musulman*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972.

[20] See the section on the party in Michael W Suleiman, *Political Parties in Lebanon: The Challenge of a Fragmented Political Culture*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967.

[21] Yasir 'Arafat denies the existence of such a problem although he complains that his movement is 'too democratic'. See the interview with Arafat in *Al-Musawwar*, 30 December 1994.

[22] The table is adapted from John Waterbury & Alan Richards, *A Political Economy of the Middle East: State, Class, and Economic Development*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990, p 362.

[23] *As-Sayyad*, 13 January 1972.

[24] See the list in *FBIS* (Foreign Broadcast Information Service), NES-95–021, 1 February 1995.

[25] I am grateful to my sister Mirvat AbuKhalil, a founding member of Greenline Association in Lebanon, for this information.

[26] Data for this table come from United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Development Programme, UNESCO, *World Resources, 1992–1993*.

[27] See Augustus Richard Norton, ed, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, 2 Vols, Leiden: E J Brill, 1994.
[28] The contributions on the subject in *Political Science* prove that the theoretical value of the application is still minimal. See *Political Science*, September 1994.
[29] For an introduction to the subject, see Keith Tester, *Civil Society*, London: Routledge, 1992.
[30] *Al-Hayat*, 21 February 1995.