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Elections Do Not a Democracy Make

By **KENNETH STEIN**

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It may be the fondest wish of many outside the Middle East — and much more importantly, the wish of those who reside in the region — to move toward democratic freedoms, but wanting it and doing it are entirely different matters.

Claiming that democracy is on the march does not make it so. It is more than throwing money at a problem, shaping an initiative or catalyzing change from afar. For democratic principles to stick, structural changes in political culture must first occur, and they must come from within. No matter what historical context you choose, Arab political culture, with its autocratic underpinnings, has remained relatively immune to major changes.

In 1988, Georgetown University professor Hisham Sharabi wrote "Neopatriarchy," an extraordinarily insightful assessment of Arab political culture. Tribe, kinship and patriarchalism, he wrote, are key structures in contemporary Arab politics. Historically, tribal leaders, caliphs, sultans, kings and more recently presidents, along with their attending elites, held tightly to power. Relationships to one another and to foreign powers enabled rulers to sustain their political dominance.

In addition, rulers and elites used their privilege and power to make the public purse their own. Nepotism, corruption, monopolies and providing contracts to friends and relatives were and remain unexceptional. Political power and economic advantage is more often determined by who you know, or through family ties.

Connections matter, whether they are for obtaining a building permit, gaining admission to a school, being promoted up the military command or receiving a company's profit. Nearly 20 years ago, while visiting Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's home village near Latakia, I asked Assad's brother who employed the village's residents. "Don't worry," he replied, "my brother will make sure everyone has a good job."

Through a variety of mechanisms, Middle Eastern elites have sustained considerable power over their populations. They control economic resources or access to them, are protected by powerful military establishments, use internal security services to manage and monitor the public's behavior and, when necessary, become the employers of last resort.

Legitimacy to rule has not come from open primary systems or raucous political conventions.

Political institutions such as parliaments or political parties have historically been exclusive clubs, serving or recycling the same elites. Efforts by the aging stalwarts of Fatah, the party that has dominated Palestinian politics for four decades, to check the rise of younger adherents are but one example.

The recent municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, held by the government with the nominal aim of increasing public participation in domestic policy, did little more than reinforce religious, tribal and family lines. While much was made of Saudi Arabia getting its democratic feet wet, real political reform is unlikely to follow. Riyadh's views on a constitutional monarchy are captured by Prince Nayef bin Abdelaziz, who, as interior minister last year, reportedly said, "We can hold elections and predetermine the results." Elections alone do not constitute democracy.

So how can democratic principles take root and be sustained if political identity remains strongly tied to family, tribe and ethnic affiliation; if politics is managed by a few; if leaders are institutions, but there is little institutional leadership; if connections matter as much or more than merit, and if there is little public trust for government? It is not impossible, as the Iraqis are feverishly trying to prove, and as the Palestinian majority has so far demonstrably shown. This is a marathon, not a 100-meter dash.

Perhaps more worrisome, when autocracy makes way for democracy, what prevents the government from becoming more tyrannical than the regime it replaced? After the shah's fall, who expected a conservative clerical regime to dominate Iran? Who's to say that another strongman won't eventually replace the now-deposed Saddam Hussein? British Prime Minister Tony Blair raised the specter of that fear recently when he said, "It would have been a really serious setback if we had replaced one strongman regime [in Iraq] with another. That would have been a disaster."

What happens if there is one man, one vote, one time? Nothing, if the autocrat's tools of control — military and secret services and use of the public purse for private purposes — are not taken away from them. In the transition to democracy, there is always the likelihood of the former elite using the new political system to re-entrench itself.

Democracy can be a dangerous organizing system if the institutions are not put in place that check the executive — advocating freedom and liberty do not solve pervasive structural problems. You cannot eat democracy; freedom does not guarantee you a job.

In a recent speech, President Bush referred to the Middle East as a region "simmering in despair and resentment. Authoritarian rule," he continued, "is not the wave of the future." However, no amount of locally nurtured pluralism will survive the massive population explosions in the region. No known annual gross domestic product increase will sustain any economy, let alone newly developing democracies or overhauled economies, when a population doubles in less than a quarter-century.

The Middle East is marketing democratic noises, but its inherent structures and behavior remain from a pre-democratic era. For all the talk of change blowing through the region, the state of reform in the Middle East, according to one of the region's most respected political

analysts, Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, is motionless. "Dictatorial regimes," he reportedly said last month, in words we would do well to heed, "not only put a stop to people's dreams and ambitions, but also kill the possibility of any renewal in society."

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