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"Middle East political change is glacial"

Kenneth W. Stein

In the last six months, enormous hope was expressed about the coming "Orange Revolution" or "Democratic Spring" in the Middle East. Arafat's death, Saddam Hussein's fall, actions of civil society reformers, passionate endorsement by Middle Eastern opinion writers, and the persistent external prodding primarily from the United States became powerful catalysts for change. A truck-full of expectations emerged as Palestinians, Iraqis, Saudis, Lebanese, and Iranians held any number of presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections. A referendum in Egypt expanded the list of candidates who could run for president later this year. Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in May, and the anticipated Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in August set the stage for removing a good portion of foreign influence that had stymied the evolution of true self-determination. A sincere coincidence of purpose emerged to change autocratic political systems to more democratic ways.

Sadly, however an enormous gap remains between hoping, writing, or advocating for change on the one hand, and seeing it evolve in the Middle East on the other. It is an enormous and lengthy task to alter a political culture. Political change occurs at a glacial pace; those in power rarely give it up voluntarily. To move from autocracy to democracy requires not only a top down courage but a bottom-up preparedness. Mostly it requires a commonly shared belief that all opinions have value, that while the majority rules, minority rights are protected, not stomped on, or obliterated by a car-bomb.

Lets be honest, practicing pluralism is not in the DNA make-up of most Middle Eastern Moslem governments. Even when elections are inclusive and contested, they do not guarantee either political change or freedom. It was the Iranian clerics who determined who could run for president. It was the exclusive control of the Palestinian Fateh party that determined who would be their candidate in the January 2005 presidential election. It is Egypt's president Mubarak who says he is opening the presidential election system to those who want to run, but it is his National Democratic Party who determines a candidate's eligibility. How do civil society advocates working in offices and store fronts compete successfully with vast Moslem mosque networks throughout the Middle East that are better financed, more organized, more responsive, and

deeply entrenched ideologically?

Impatient expectations for change can not be met. Altering political systems does not occur with either the speed or efficiency to which we are accustomed in taking cash from an ATM bank machine or securing a meal at fast food restaurant. Setting timetables and stating expected outcomes is fine for a business or investors who are used to quarterly reports, but it does not hold for political change. In fact, setting timetables to accomplish specific benchmarks is foolish. Amongst the Palestinians, setting their parliamentary elections for July and postponing them is a case in point. In Iraq, the interim government approved a timetable calling for the adoption of a constitution by August 15, but the chances of meeting that deadline are remote. While the insurgency in Iraq is killing coalition forces everyday, the possibility of a six-month extension in writing the constitution is real. That would delay the projected December 15 elections intended to ratify the as yet unwritten constitution. When the Iraqi security forces can take control of their own country and the political process is working, then the foreign forces should leave. Reaching that juncture does not answer whether the overthrow of Iraq was successful. Success is determined in the decades to come when we see if the Iraqis and the Middle East are better off than when Saddam ruled.

Third, transitions from long periods of authoritarianism to something more pluralistic are time consuming and potentially unstable. And democracies themselves are difficult to organize and sometimes messy.

At the end of one thousand years of Sunni rule in Iraq, the Shia are now in power. Each group requires time to readjust to the changed status quo. The Sunni are asking should we boycott or participate in the political process? The Shia have to decide whether political or physical retribution for being constrained and trod upon for centuries can be easily forgotten. So far the answer is no.

June's completed parliamentary elections in Lebanon reveal a consensus against Syrian domination, but also reaffirmed Lebanon's coveted sectarianism. A "virtual democracy is being played out in the Lebanese media arena...(it) lacks any real substance" is how an editorial in the Lebanese Daily Star put it recently. For Lebanon to emerge from cronyism, corruption, staggering social security costs, frequent electricity shortages, monopolies, and armed militias, it needs leaders to find solutions to Lebanon's problems not merely protect their sectarian interests. That requires compromise, not merely drinking old wine from new bottles!

Plaguing most Middle Eastern political systems are dominant roles played by the military and internal security systems. What is needed is

less expenditure on regime protection. Broader still, there exists the all too frequent political willingness to use of force and violence to solve problems. Three notable assassinations in Lebanon since February, Palestinian lawlessness remains to be tackled by the new Palestinian leadership —this is not merely disarming militant groups who want to fight Israel— it is removal from the Palestinian street of thugs, hoodlums, gangs, kidnapers, and extortionists. And in Iraq, it is the Iraqi civilians who are being brutalized in massive numbers by car bombs, assassinations, and kidnappings. And while this happens, Arab leaders remain silent, almost unperturbed by the regular use of violence as it generates climates of fear and cynicism in the minds of the general population. Democracies do not function or function well when the boot of government sits on the population's neck.

Finally, there is a difference in meaning of what “reform” signifies. For the EU, the US, and others reform means instituting democracy, allowing free enterprise to blossom and encouraging pluralism. But for many in the Middle East, reform means ridding their governments of autocrats who have stolen from the public purse. The theme that connects aspirations of the general publics in Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and amongst the Palestinians is the hope to end corruption and autocracy and give more people access to the wealth. Former Egyptian President Nasser proclaimed he would do that for Egypt when his military coup overthrew the corrupt monarchy in the 1950s. Instead he drove the Egyptian economy into the ground. Khomeyni and the clerics tossed out the Shah, in part due to his unrestrained spending on military equipment and self-promotion, and what does Iran have to show for a quarter century of clerical rule? An election of a ‘reformer’ who wants to reform the liberalism that has crept into Iranian society, and turn back the clock to the Khomeyni period. Lets not forget that the current president elect of Iran, reportedly was one of the students who occupied the American embassy and held hostages for 444 days! Electing ideologues may change rule at the top, it does not guarantee the end of corruption nor steps on the road toward pluralism.

Professor Kenneth W. Stein teaches Middle Eastern history and politics at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.