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YOU CAN NOT EAT DEMOCRACY

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If measured in decades, this moment in Middle Eastern history is enormously significant. Perhaps not since the 1914-1923 period, when the Ottoman Empire fell and borders of modern Arab states were created by British and French imperialists, has the Middle East faced an equivalent transformational decade. Middle Eastern autocrats are in a state of declining personal power. Parliaments and parliamentarians are asserting themselves. Individuals in Arab societies are demanding a say in determining their own future. The written and electronic Arab media are awash with vigorous criticism of ruling elites, social values, and education systems.

Compare today with fifteen years ago: in the early 1990s any public demonstration in Beirut would have been snuffed out by Syrian troops; an article criticizing Arafat would have landed you in jail and members of your family jobless; raise your voice against Saddam Hussein and you disappeared at 2am without a trace; mention women's rights in Saudi Arabia and you could lose a limb.

People in Afghanistan, the Palestinians and Iraqis have gone to the polls; they have set in motion the creation of new regimes aimed at taking power from war lords, tribal leaders or autocrats. Egypt's President Mubarak volunteered to have a semi-competitive presidential election; a pro-Syrian Lebanese government has resigned under the pressure of popular opinion. When a would-be Palestinian government appointed after Arafat's death had too many remnants from his corrupt rule, the Palestinian prime minister was forced to appoint a completely new cast of politicians, mostly technocrats who were not tied to the earlier crony-run Arafat political machine. And now, the Lebanese are demonstrating daily--clamoring for a withdrawal of 15,000 Syrian troops in occupation of Lebanon since the 1980s.

Why now and where does this unraveling of autocratic control lead the region? Can it all be good? Are the changes cosmetic and transitory or substantial and structural? If they are long lasting, what do they mean for the Middle East?

For seventy years until the end of the Cold War and the 1991 Gulf War, Arab states and their leaders fought against colonialism; they kept

western penetration to a minimum. Since 1991, and particularly in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the West has physically and ideologically returned to the Middle East with a vengeance. Western rules of political behavior and democratic systems of governance have cracked the autocratic Middle Eastern fabric.

Part of the reason may have to do with the death of Arafat and the ouster of Saddam Hussein, but their departures represented a broader end of a charismatic era of leadership in the Middle East. Strong Middle Eastern leaders with strong wills are gone. Gone are Arafat, Assad senior, Ayatollah Khomeini, Boumedienne, Bourguiba, Hassan of Morocco, Jordan's King Hussein, Nasser, Sadat, and the Shah of Iran. Each is now replaced by another autocrat, but one certainly less imposing, lacking that extra popular appeal.

Gone also are the important organizing ideologies that grabbed the hearts and minds of the region's population in the post World War II period--Nasserism, pan-Arabism, anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, and anti-colonialism. Some remain today, but in lesser states of concentrated attention. While anti-Americanism or anti-Bushism may be an organizing tune, democracy, freedom and the rights of the individual trump them both.

Gone also are uneducated and once pliant societies. They were easily manipulated and controlled by autocrats. Access to the internet, satellite television, and rapid communication makes you aware of changes elsewhere: autocrats were tossed aside --Ceausescu in Rumania, Suharto in Indonesia, and the Orange revolution in the Ukraine--why not toss aside their style of rule, if not them personally? The perennial Palestinian quest for self-determination and Israeli preparedness to urge it forward has had an enormous impact on the pace of regional change.

Freedom and democracy can spread in the Middle East. But they do not solve the region's vast structural, social, and economic problems. You can not eat democracy; freedom does not guarantee you a job. Without an economic future, why should a person protect hard earned freedoms? In the transition to democracies, there is always the danger of the former elite using the new political system to entrench itself. When autocracies change to democratic ways, what prevents them from becoming more tyrannical or just as tyrannical as the former regime? Ask Iranians who tossed out the Shah, but found themselves with an equally abusive autocratic regime. Britain's Tony Blair raised the spectre 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." But could it still happen in Iraq or in

Afghanistan?

What happens if there is one man, one vote, one time? If the autocrat's tools of control (military and secret services and use of the public purse for private purposes) are not removed from them, elections and constitutions are meaningless. Democracy can be a dangerous organizing system, if the institutions are not put in place that check the executive, and if the population does not observe newly adopted rules that aim to protect the individual not the family or ethnic group.

The rush to political change notwithstanding, the Middle East is still a place where clan, tribe, ethnicity, and sectarianism are still important in social organization and political decision-making. Breaking those barriers will not be easy. Outside parties should continue to nourish civil society and economic development. Immediate attention must be placed on slowing down the population growth. No amount of locally grown pluralism in the Middle East, without population control will slow down massive Arab migrations. No known increase in annual gross domestic product will sustain a democracy, particularly new ones, where the population doubles in less than a quarter century.

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