

How to Support Democracy in the Arab World

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When the Arab Spring began in 2011, supporters of democracy in the Middle East had widespread hopes that the region might turn a corner and move from autocracy to democracy. Those hopes have been realized reasonably well in Tunisia, which has seen free elections and the peaceful alternation of power between political parties. But many other Arab countries have cracked down on dissent and political speech.

The United States should nevertheless support those seeking peaceful change toward more open and democratic political systems. The Arab uprisings of 2011–2012 suggest that the public desire for change is widespread, and democratic political systems provide paths for peaceful change that can accommodate many different social and economic views through compromise.

On the other hand, governments that maintain power solely through repression, like many of the so-called republics in the Arab world, are illegitimate and inherently unstable. While none of the Arab monarchies has been overthrown since the Arab Spring, they too must include their populations in governance. In Jordan and Morocco, this seems to be the monarchs' intent.

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U.S. support for democracy and human rights in the Arab world has varied over time, and presidential administrations have too often preferred dealing with autocrats to supporting their critics. President-Elect Donald J. Trump will soon face these choices, and his campaign rhetoric suggests that he may view support for democracy as a luxury the United States cannot afford when faced with terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State. But Islamic extremism is an idea, and while it cannot be defeated without arms, it cannot be defeated by arms alone. A better idea, democracy, is a formidable and necessary weapon.



Tunisian

President Beji Caïd Essebsi talks with Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the Ennahda movement, during a party congress in Tunis. (Photo: Zoubeir Souissi/Reuters)

Building Democracy Amid Instability

Several Muslim countries, including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Senegal, and Turkey, have sustained varying degrees of democracy over time, but in the Arab world, the only positive example is Tunisia. Kuwait, Jordan, and Morocco have elected parliaments, but their monarchs have transferred little power from the royal palaces. Violence is widespread in Libya, and an effective state has yet to be established there. Syria has seen [years of civil war](#), with horrendous humanitarian results. In Algeria, a visibly ailing president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, has stayed in office despite a 2014 election that was not free, and the military remains the true power. In Egypt, an elected president was overthrown in a popular coup, the military remains in control, and President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi has cracked down on political activities. In Bahrain, a Sunni monarchy rules ever more repressively over a restive majority-Shia population.

Given this record and the backdrop of serious security challenges from Islamist extremists, it can be argued that support for Arab democracy should be removed from or at least downgraded on the list of U.S. goals in the Middle East. Democracy promotion, critics argue, embitters friendly Arab governments while achieving little for Arab populations or the United States. What is more, opening up politics may result in electoral victories for Islamists or other groups that are hostile to the United States and the liberal values it seeks to promote.

Poorly handled democracy-promotion efforts can indeed have these effects, but the United States should not abandon its support for expanding political rights and the rule of law in the Arab Middle East—including in the monarchies. It should instead work to maintain an adaptive policy that takes account of local history and traditions as well as the legitimacy that still inheres in many Middle Eastern governments, including most of the monarchies.

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Polls in the [“Arab Barometer” series](#), conducted by Arab and American scholars, found that 80 percent of respondents support the proposition, “A democratic system may have problems, yet it is better than other political systems.” U.S. support for repressive and illegitimate regimes therefore risks further alienating Arab populations, who may see the United States as indifferent or hostile to their desires for less corrupt and repressive governance. Moreover, Arab democrats are usually pro-Western and reliable allies for the United States when they enter political office. Washington always has difficulty sustaining close relationships with repressive regimes: objections from Congress and influential voices in American society grow louder as crackdowns grow harsher. Finally, such regimes are inherently unstable. As the collapse of Arab regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen demonstrated, governments that lack legitimacy are poor bets. Uncritical support for them is not a realistic policy.

American policy should reflect the United States’ own political beliefs: the goal is not merely democracy in the narrow sense of winner-take-all elections. The U.S. Constitution instead establishes a system of institutional restrictions on government power that guarantees minority rights and the rule of law. Too often the United States has concentrated on pressing for elections without giving equal weight to the institutional and legal arrangements that protect political rights, especially for minorities and political groups that are out of power. This is not to argue against the centrality of elections, which are the only democratic way to determine who should govern, but to suggest that U.S. support for democracy should stress nonelectoral elements of democracy more often than has been the case. Given the role of law and justice in Muslim history and beliefs, for example, greater efforts to help write constitutions and legal codes, protect parties that lose elections, and maintain independent judicial systems may be more beneficial than election monitoring in many cases.

Recommendations

In most Arab countries, political liberty will continue to be a distant goal that neither the United States nor any other outside power can deliver. Indigenous democratic actors are often weak, and those seeking political liberty and the rule of law, more effective and more open government, and a closer partnership between rulers and ruled should be encouraged. Such actors exist in Egypt and the monarchies. Support

for political openings, liberty, and law is a far better formula than supporting repressive regimes. There will be moments, in the Middle East as elsewhere, when American interests and principles diverge, particularly due to security threats, but it is not in the interest of the United States to see political life in Arab nations crushed.

Provide high-level support. Political pressure and public support for political liberalization—and criticism of crackdowns—by the president and the secretary of state are more important than programming and should be the central feature of U.S. democracy promotion. The U.S. government spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year, primarily through the National Endowment for Democracy and the U.S. Agency for International Development, on programs that support what are usually small nongovernmental organizations promoting causes including freedom of expression, belief, and association; free elections; and women’s rights. In countries that do not permit political parties, such programs keep hope of future progress alive, teach important skills to democratic activists, signal continuing American support, and allow some political life under repressive conditions. Sustaining the morale of men and women struggling for the political values for which the United States stands is no small achievement, and in dozens of cases individuals who were once dissidents have moved into important political positions after dictatorships fell. For example, Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of Tunisia’s main Islamist political party, spent years in prison and in exile, just as Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa had been “enemies of the state” before they became heads of state in the Czech Republic and Poland, respectively.

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But how much can be achieved by such programs often depends on whether the highest levels in these regimes have decided to open up political space, and those decisions can be affected by top-level U.S. pressure. Former President Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt is an example: there was a reduction in repression of dissenters and a partial political opening from 2003 to 2005, when top officials in President George W. Bush’s administration applied public and private pressure. When that pressure diminished, from 2006 to 2008, so too did the political opening. U.S. democracy programming had not expanded or contracted substantially; what changed was the regime’s understanding of and reaction to U.S. demands.

Emphasize political party building. The United States should recognize that political parties, not NGOs, are the essential building blocks of democratic politics. Civil society may be the only space for embryonic political life in the most repressive societies, but even if NGOs lead efforts to fight tyranny, they cannot govern. With few exceptions, they lack the organization, national outreach, and strategies needed to lead a nation.

Western democracy-promotion organizations, including those funded by the U.S. government, are often reluctant to help political parties or movements; they may fear provoking governments or appearing partisan. In some cases, local political groups will reject assistance from the United States, which is most effectively offered today through the quasigovernmental National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute. Local leaders are the best judges of when assistance from the United States will carry too heavy a price. But even in those cases, training can often be channeled through European and other groups.

Set flexible goals. Realism demands that the United States adapt its efforts to each national situation rather than reach for utopian goals. Pressure for genuine democratization will be sensible in some cases; in others, a realistic policy will be limited to urging more just rule and respect for fundamental human rights. There is no Arab nation where American calls for just application of existing national laws should be impossible, nor can it persuasively be denounced as ignorant or hostile foreign interference.

Realism requires an understanding of the role of legitimacy in sustaining regimes. Even the Arab monarchies depend on legitimacy, which they derive from some partnership between the rulers and the ruled. There are many ways the United States can address legitimacy issues, ranging from strengthening the role of elected, if not very powerful, parliaments in several states to reducing corruption, reducing poverty, and relying on law rather than *wasta* (clout or connections) to determine citizens' relationships with their governments. Even in countries where there are no political parties and there is little political life, the United States can still promote relations between ruler and ruled that are more just—and may open a path toward stable democracy.