

Summary of Workshop on
“Democratization in the Middle East: A Provisional Assessment”
February 5, 2009

On February 5, CDDRL hosted a workshop on democratization in the Middle East, in collaboration with a team of visiting French scholars led by Olivier Roy. The discussions, which were cosponsored by the Geneva-based Foundation for Research and Development in the Middle East, focused heavily on the recent history of another lost opportunity for political reform in the Arab world. The hope was that democratization would engulf the Middle East, following the collapse of the Soviet system, the privatization of most economies, the shock waves of 9/11, the passing away of an old generation of autocratic rulers, the introduction of “rule of law” conditions in most Western and UN programs, and the “color revolutions” in several post-communist states. However, this hope did not materialize.

The workshop explored several reasons, some structural, some circumstantial, for the recent failure of the region to achieve any sustainable progress toward democracy.

1. The regimes have been politically savvy and adroit. They have not only adapted but have even used the pressures and changes in order to achieve more stability. They have organized semi-free elections that contributed to neutralizing the opposition in countries like Morocco and Jordan. The different “pacts” eventually worked in favour of the regimes: the conditioned and well controlled participation of some Muslim Brothers in parliaments (Jordan, Kuwait) functioned to tame and divide them, and the Islamists who played within the rules have been confined to a polite opposition with no prospect for a real sharing of the power. In addition, an extensive privatization process (except in Algeria) has benefited a new upper class which is apolitical.

2. The Western endeavour to reach out to and strengthen Arab “civil society” missed the point: the “democratic” actors tapped for engagement and assistance in fact had shallow roots among the “real” society of these countries and were often associated, in the eyes of public opinion, with “Western imperialism,” specifically in the wake of the US war on terror.

3. No constructive dialogue has been established with the Islamist mainstream movements; worse, the West refused to engage in talks with the Hamas leadership after it won the January 2006 Palestinian elections. This “a la carte democratization” has cast the West as insincere, giving a bad name to the process of democratization (and “democracy promotion”).

4. The “third way” movements, which tried to go beyond the harsh choice of “either dictators or Islamists,” fared quite poorly in electoral competition throughout the region and have been unable to sustain even the initial momentum they generated in some countries (such as Kefaya in Egypt and the “cedar revolution” in Lebanon). Thus, the regimes are still benefitting from the polarization of the opposition between the antagonistic poles of Islamists and liberals. Both agree on criticizing the regimes, both speak more or less favourably about elections and democracy, but they are sharply split on the definition of social norms (for example the roles of women, and of the sharia). Moreover, Arab regimes have effectively exploited these divisions to prevent the building of a coalition of secular and religious opponents.

5. The “war on terror,” by lumping together terrorists and Islamist movements, has paradoxically enhanced the prestige of anti-US movements (though not necessarily Al Qaeda) and has pitched nationalism against democratization.

The present stalemate is illustrated by two trends:

1. Escapism, illustrated by:

- a withdrawal from the domestic political scene (for example, high levels of abstention during the last Moroccan elections, and overwhelming abstention in Egyptian elections);
- a new wave of emigration, driven less by economic motivation than by a diffuse sense of having no future;
- delinquency and anomic attitudes of social alienation; and
- jihadism, or Islamic struggle (although it seems that jihadism is running out of steam).

2. Political mobilization, which takes diverse forms:

- around the plight of the Palestinians, a protest which is expressed not so much under Islamic solidarity but more under a call for the respect of universal values (Israel is accused of ignoring human rights, the international community of double standards);
- local popular mobilization on socioeconomic issues (high prices, and growing labor activism, including strikes), which may augur a revival of left-wing militancy;
- Internet mobilization (via blogs and protests organized via Facebook, like the April 6 mobilization in Egypt), spreading among mainly among young educated middle class people.

While the latter two forms of political activism could generate new political pressure for democratic change, the workshop concluded that the project of democratic reform in the Arab world is now seriously stalled and, at least for the moment, contained, discouraged, and out-resourced, and outmaneuvered.

Among the participants in the workshop were Olivier Roy , Senior Researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Professor at EHESS (the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences), and one of the West’s leading scholars of Islam. Accompanying him were Henry Laurens, Professor of History at the College de France, Lahouri Addi, Professor at the Institute of Political Studies in Lyon, and Farhad Khosrokhavar (EHESS Paris). Stanford participants included CDDRL scholars Larry Diamond, Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, Donald Emmerson, Shadi Hamid, and Moulay Hicham Ben Abdallah, as well as Abbasi Program Visiting Scholar Stephane LaCroix.