

The Democratic Mosaic

by *Martin Walker*

The administration of President George W. Bush has been defined by the war on terrorism, its response to the appalling terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. But it wants to be remembered for a grander and more positive strategy, as unveiled by the president at the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003 and further elaborated in his State of the Union address this year. This “forward strategy of freedom in the greater Middle East” seeks to promote free elections, free markets, a free press, and free labor unions to advance democracy and opportunity in 22 Arab countries, stretching from Morocco on the Atlantic coast to Oman on the shores of the Indian Ocean. The inhabitants of those countries number some 300 million, speak diverse Arabic dialects that are often mutually incomprehensible, and have long endured violence, poverty, and arbitrary rule. The United States has little choice but to attempt this daunting challenge, said Bush: “As long as the Middle East remains a place of tyranny and despair and anger, it will continue to produce men and movements that threaten the safety of America and our friends.”

The grandly ambitious project is inspired partly by the Helsinki treaties of 1975, which gave crucial breathing room to human rights groups in the old Soviet bloc, and partly by the success of American policies after 1945 that led to democratic governments in Japan and West Germany. To be sure, 59 years after victory in World War II, American forces remain deployed in those two countries, and the new strategy for the Middle East may similarly depend, in part, on a U.S. military presence.

But merely to prescribe democracy is not to settle the matter, because democracy comes in such a bewildering variety of forms. There are parliamentary monarchies without any written constitution (Britain), highly centralized presidential democracies (France), federal democracies (Germany), democracies with separated powers and a venerable constitution (United States), and democracies that seem to flourish despite an effective one-party system (Japan). There are new democracies (South Korea and Taiwan), and democracies that maintain most of their essential freedoms despite the strains of war and terrorism (Israel). Some democracies have survived and deepened despite poverty (Costa Rica), violent separatist movements (modern Spain), recurrent wars (much of Europe), and deep ethnic divisions (Brazil). India’s democracy has flourished despite all those challenges and the further complications of a debilitating caste system.

There are democracies so decentralized that the “central” government is almost impotent (Switzerland), and democracies so young and fragile that they exist only by means of a powerful and intrusive outside authority (Bosnia-Herzegovina). There are democracies restored from within (Spain and Portugal) and democracies born in the defeat of military dictators (Greece and Argentina); in Chile, a vigorous democratic movement eventually ended the military rule of General Augusto Pinochet, who had led a coup in 1973 to topple the elected government of Salvador Allende.

Democracy, however defined, has scored some stunning advances since Allende’s fall. According to Freedom House, which for 30 years has published an annual survey of political rights around the world, democracy’s reach has grown ever more extensive. In 1972, the year of its first survey, Freedom House rated 43 countries as “free,” 38 as “partly free,” and 69 as “not free.” The 2004 Freedom House survey rates 88 states as free, 55 as partly free, and 49 as not free. So the number of free countries has more than doubled over the past 30 years, the number of partly free states has grown by 17, and the number of repressive (i.e., not free) states has declined by 20. (The absolute number of states has grown over the same period.)

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Democracy has proved so diverse over the past half-century that it confounds easy definition. It’s a strikingly robust plant, capable of almost infinite variety. But in the Islamic world, democracy struggles on unfriendly soil. The Freedom House survey of the 47 nations with an Islamic majority found only nine electoral democracies, none of them in the Middle East. But even the electoral democracies often lack fundamental rights. Of states with an Islamic majority, Freedom House ranks only two, Senegal and Mali, as free. Why should this be? India’s example suggests that the influence of colonialism is not an adequate explanation. Nor is poverty, which, in any case, is not an issue in the oil-rich states. The explanation must lie elsewhere.

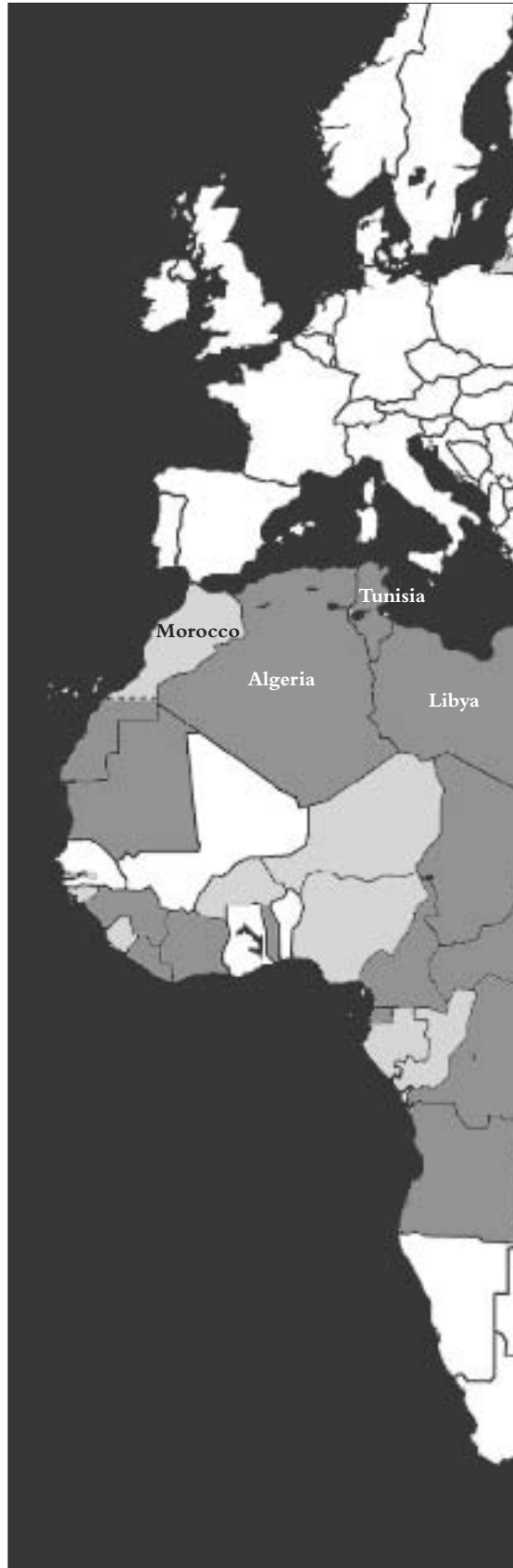
Most political theory about the key components of democracy focuses on three important preconditions: the role of certain key state institutions, the strength of civil society, and socioeconomic and cultural structure. The key institutions include elections, in some form, with a secret ballot; reasonably free speech and media; and the rule of law, as administered by a tolerably independent judiciary to protect the rights of minorities. The rule of law is critical. (Without it, Thomas Jefferson’s somber definition of a democracy as “nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one percent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine,” might well discredit the enterprise.) It should extend to all citizens, and cover commercial as well as criminal matters; otherwise, property rights and the sanctity of contract are at risk. But the rule of law can take many forms. The countries of the European Union, for example, manage to function with fundamentally different legal systems. Most Continental nations prefer variants

of the French system, in which a state-employed magistrate acts as investigator and as prosecutor before a judicial panel. The British retain trial by jury and an adversarial system in which the Crown presents the prosecution and the defense then tries to refute it.

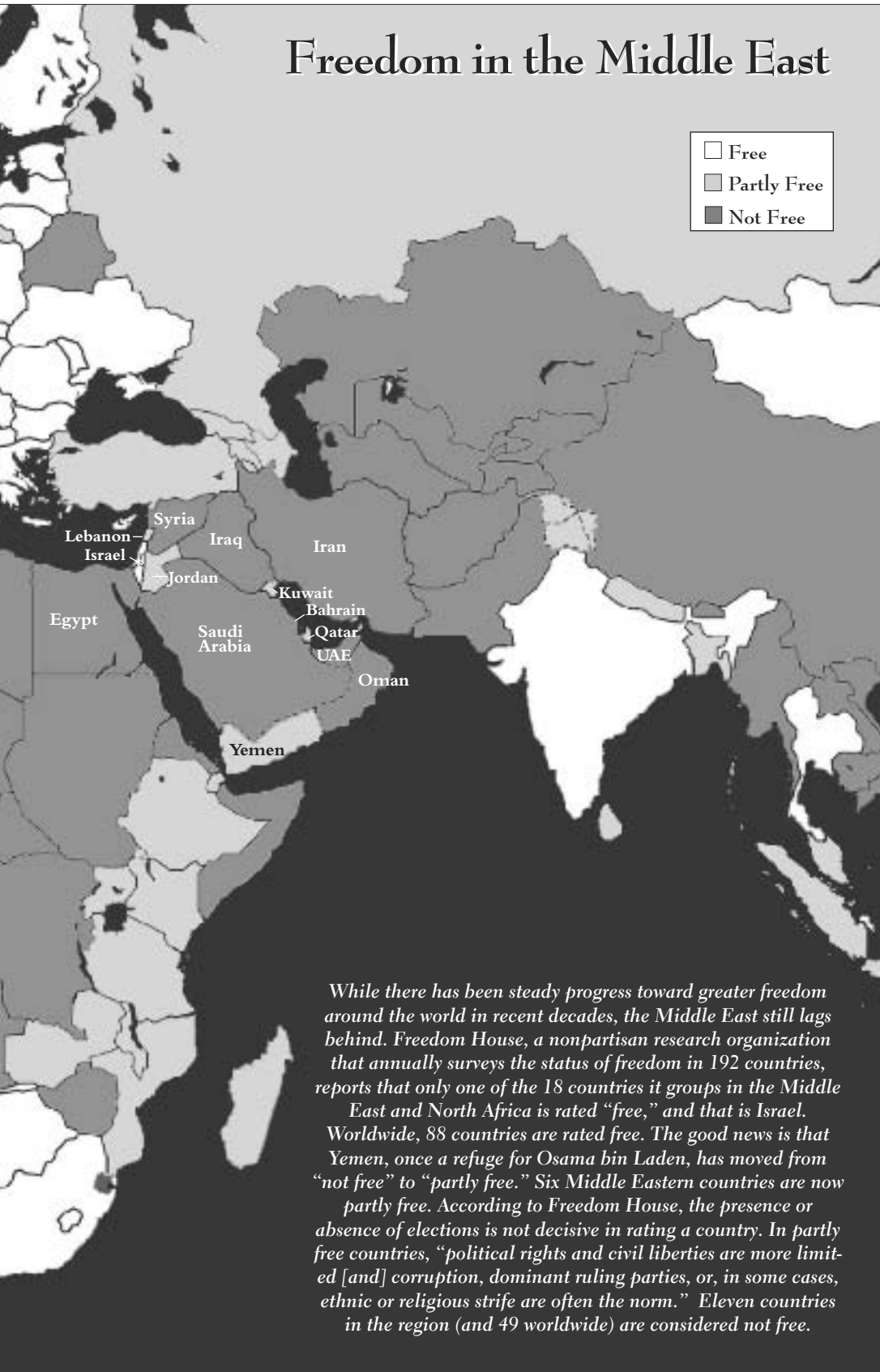
But such distinctions between the legal forms of Western democracy are mere details by comparison with the gulf that separates Islamic law, sharia, from Western concepts of law. Although democracy can function with a state-established religion, as in Britain or Israel, the question of whether it can emerge in the shadow of sharia remains open. The difficulty is less the hudud, the stern code of punishment for fornication (flogging), theft (amputation), and adultery (stoning), than it is sharia's fundamental objection to any separation of church and state. Nor can there be much freedom of individual conscience when the penalty for converting from Islam to another religion is death. This is not to say necessarily that democracy cannot prosper under sharia, but finding an accommodation will be difficult, and is unlikely to be peaceful. It took centuries of war and dispute—and eventually the Reformation—for medieval Europe to resolve a similar clash of prerogatives between the canon law of the Roman Catholic Church and the secular law of earthly sovereigns.

The importance of civil society in the emergence of democracy has long been recognized. “Among the laws that rule human society,” Alexis de Tocqueville suggested in *Democracy in America*, “there is one that seems to be more precise and clear than all others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow

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Freedom in the Middle East



While there has been steady progress toward greater freedom around the world in recent decades, the Middle East still lags behind. Freedom House, a nonpartisan research organization that annually surveys the status of freedom in 192 countries, reports that only one of the 18 countries it groups in the Middle East and North Africa is rated “free,” and that is Israel. Worldwide, 88 countries are rated free. The good news is that Yemen, once a refuge for Osama bin Laden, has moved from “not free” to “partly free.” Six Middle Eastern countries are now partly free. According to Freedom House, the presence or absence of elections is not decisive in rating a country. In partly free countries, “political rights and civil liberties are more limited [and] corruption, dominant ruling parties, or, in some cases, ethnic or religious strife are often the norm.” Eleven countries in the region (and 49 worldwide) are considered not free.

and improve in the same ration.” Samuel Huntington, in his seminal *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1969), saw the insufficient development of this art as explaining the problems of “the modernizing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, where the political community is fragmented against itself, and where political institutions have little power, less majesty and no resiliency, where in many cases governments simply do not govern.” Huntington discerned in the countries being destabilized by rapid change “a lack of civic morale and public spirit capable of giving meaning and direction to the public interest,” and concluded that “the primary problem of politics is the lag in the development of political institutions behind social and economic change.”

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To give life to those political institutions, a civil society is needed, in the form, for example, of sports and hobby clubs, labor unions, cafés, and other nongovernmental and political entities within which people can gather and argue and cooperate outside state structures. All of

these—and an increasingly independent news media spurred by satellite TV and the Internet, charitable bodies, and women’s groups—exist throughout most of the Arab world. Not all of them are organized through the mosques, and many thrive despite political repression, the customary restraints upon a public role for women, and the competing tug of tribal tradition. In countries that are making significant steps toward representative government, such as Morocco, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait, civil society is blossoming fast. Those five countries, all monarchies, have sovereigns who seem prepared to enlarge the political space for their subjects. The prospects for “the art of associating together” in these states are promising, in part because long-established royal dynasties with their own religious credentials do not seem intimidated by the Islamist clerics.

Civil society is inextricably linked with socioeconomic structure, but the economic circumstances of successful democracies are widely divergent. India is an obvious example of democracy unimpeded by poverty, as is Costa Rica, with a long and exemplary record of representative government in Latin America. In the most populous countries of the Arab world, wealth is actually distributed more equitably than in the United States.

Economists measure income distribution in a state by means of the Gini index (named for Corrado Gini, the Italian statistician who devised it). The lower the index, the more evenly income is distributed in a country; the higher the index, the greater the share of wealth owned by the rich. So a fully egalitarian society would have a Gini figure of 0, and a soci-

Wealth and Inequality

<i>Country</i>	<i>Gini index</i>	<i>Per capita GDP (U.S.\$)</i>
Japan	24.9	25,130
Sweden	25.0	24,180
Yemen	33.4	790
Egypt	34.4	3,520
Britain	36.0	24,160
Jordan	36.4	3,870
Morocco	39.5	3,600
China	40.3	4,020
United States	40.8	34,320
Russia	45.6	7,100
Mexico	53.1	8,430

Parts of the Arab world may enjoy less income inequality than the United States. A low Gini index connotes low levels of income inequality.

ety in which the richest person owned everything would have a figure of 100. The table gives the Gini figures for selected countries, with gross domestic product (GDP) shown in purchasing power parity. It's important to note, however, that figures for the Arab world are notoriously unreliable, and that, for the oil-rich states, a Gini index is almost meaningless because of the extraordinarily high proportion of foreign workers.

Income disparities are a crude indicator, concealing both regional differences (a low income in New York City can be relatively high in Mississippi) and many social subtleties. But the figures suggest that democracy can flourish in countries with sharp disparities of income, and survive even in countries such as Brazil, where the disparities tend toward the acute. If reasonably even levels of income distribution are a useful predictor, then many Arab countries are in promising shape.

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Incomes may not be a helpful indicator, however, in analyzing a particularly distinctive characteristic of democracies—the middle class, which plays a stabilizing political role. The middle class is hard to define because income is only one factor in its measurement; social origin, education, career, and lifestyle all contribute to the making of a middle class. Nonetheless, there are common features. Members of the middle class have homes and savings. They make some provision for their old age. They invest in the education of their children. Thus, they have a stake in a stable future, and that provides a strong personal incentive for them to be politically

active—to ensure that schools are good, that the financial system will handle their savings honestly, that police will safeguard their property, that courts will be honest, and that the government will not tax them too highly or waste their savings through inflation. They need a free press to tell them what the government and courts are doing, and freedom of speech and assembly and elections to organize their opposition if the government lets them down. In short, though it may be simplistic to say that a middle class, by definition, will demand the kinds of institutions that help sustain democracy, such institutions and a socially active and politically engaged middle class will mutually reinforce each other.

The middle class is growing fast in most Arab countries, although it's growing most quickly in the state bureaucracies. But no doubt as a consequence of the subservient role of women, the Arab middle class is not growing nearly quickly enough to cope with the stunningly high birthrates that give the region such a high proportion of young people under the age of 25. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the median age in Egypt and Algeria is now 20; in Lebanon it's 18, and in Iraq it's 17. On average, annual population growth remains about three percent in many Arab countries, compared with two percent globally.

The role of women in the Arab world points to a deeper issue: the degree to which democracy depends on culture. The long stability of Britain and the United States, the first countries to produce a mass middle class, is telling. Some political theorists suggest that the tradition of juries and common law, property rights, elected parliaments, a free press, and largely free trade, along with the low taxes permitted by a happy geography that precluded the need for a vast standing army, endowed the English-speaking world with a special predisposition to democracy. The theory is beguiling, but it turns ominous when used to suggest that some peoples and cultures are inherently antipathetic to democracy—as has been said at various times of Germans, Japanese, Indians, Africans, and Russians, and as is now being said of the Islamic world in general.

The debate on democracy's potential in the Middle East will continue, even as democracy's green shoots are evident in Oman's elections, Qatar's new constitution (which gives women the right to vote), and Jordan's and Morocco's significant steps toward representative government. But these potential democracies remain works in timid progress, proceeding under two baleful shadows. The first is the example of Iran, where a democratically elected parliament and president have been unable to establish their authority over the ayatollahs of the Guardian Council, who control the judicial system, the Pasdaran Revolutionary Guard, and the domestic security agencies, and who are deeply suspicious of democracy. As Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini wrote in 1977, "The real threat to Islam does not come from the Shah, but from the idea of imposing on Muslim lands the Western system of democracy, which is a form of prostitution." The second shadow is the nagging fear that a democratic election in most states of the Arab world is likely to be won by the well-organized Islamists. The army inter-

vened in Algeria to prevent the Islamic Salvation Front from taking office after it won the elections of 1992. That triggered an insurgency in which more than 100,000 people have since died.

Still, it's not entirely clear that the separation of religion and state, a concept Islam finds difficult to embrace, is a prerequisite for democracy. The British have functioned tolerably well with an established Church of England for nearly five centuries; Germany's Christian Democratic and Christian Social Union coalitions have provided impeccably democratic government; and France's proud republican tradition of laicism has not spared the nation political anguish over the right of Muslim women to wear headscarves in school. But there's little left in modern European politics of the religious passions that unleashed war, massacres, and persecution in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Islam, at least in the Arab world, has yet to undergo its Reformation, and those Islamic states that have produced a more relaxed religious form have their own difficulties. Indonesia is a tremulous democracy, rent by ethnic as well as religious tensions, with the army constantly poised to intervene again. Malaysia, economically the most dynamic of Islamic countries, has seen Islamist extremist groups win power in two states—one of which they lost in recent elections—after years of well-funded Wahhabi proselytizing. Turkey, where a moderate Islamic party has now come peacefully to power by election, remains the most promising example of the way in which Islam and democracy might prosper together. Since the reforms of Kemal Atatürk, Turkey has had 80 years of secular rule, 50 years of NATO membership, and now the lure of joining the European Union to strengthen its democratic commitment.

Turkey, of course, is a constant reminder that there's little in history or political theory to suggest that Islamic nations cannot become democracies. Indeed, the constitutional monarchy and parliamentary system that ruled independent Iraq from 1932 to 1958 produced the freest press, the most vibrant civil society, and the most impressive levels of health and education in the Arab world during that period. Yet Iraq was a clouded democracy: The elected prime minister, Nuri Said, was an authoritarian figure, susceptible to British influence, who routinely suspended parliaments when they proved hostile. At least the latest efforts at democratization in the Arab world take place under happier circumstances, without the looming presence of the Cold War.

President Bush's new "forward strategy of freedom" will need a great deal of international support, both political and financial, if it is to succeed, and a patient world will have to persuade a highly skeptical Arab public that the United States is resolved to achieve a fair peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Ultimately, however, as the president made clear in January, his strategy rests on an act of faith: "It is mistaken, and condescending, to assume that whole cultures and great religions are incompatible with liberty and self-government. I believe that God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom. And even when that desire is crushed by tyranny for decades, it will rise again." □