

An Open Door

by Saad Eddin Ibrahim

It's a little-known fact, but the Arab world had a liberal age that lasted for nearly 100 years, from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th. The legacy of that age may provide the ground on which to build new Arab democracies. *Newsweek's* Fareed Zakaria and others who have argued that liberalism is a prerequisite for sound democracy contend that its various elements—free media, competent legal institutions, the rule of law, and ethno-religious tolerance—attune individuals to the spirit and behaviors of citizenship and predispose groups, communities, and other collectivities to the rules of fair play. They become tolerant, for example, of the unpleasant outcomes invariably built into electoral politics: “Losers” don't habitually contest the outcome of elections or resort to violent means, and “winners” don't disregard the legitimate interests of the losers. Such restraint can't be legislated. It needs to be learned and internalized by citizens if they are to enjoy sound democratic governance. So, too, must they learn the skills of organizing, mobilizing, debating, and compromising that are inculcated through the spread of small-scale institutions of civil society.

During the past two centuries, the Arab world has gone through a sequence of overlapping political phases: an early liberal, a colonial, a middle liberal, a populist radical, an Islamic, and a new liberal. Not every Arab country passed through all six phases, but Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Tunisia have done so, and their experience is instructive. In each, external factors triggered the start of political transformation. Beginning in the late 18th century, the encroachment of French, British, Italian, Israeli, and American forces was the impetus for the birth of modernity, even as the presence of the foreign powers also unleashed forces of resistance. As one phase ended and left its legacy and another began, certain social formations—classes, occupations, and ethnic groups—declined, and new ones arose. Each phase was associated with a distinct social formation. The landed bourgeoisie, for example, championed the first liberal age, and the middle class the second. The lower middle class dominated the populist radical phase, and a mix of the lower and lowest urban classes has sustained the current Islamic moment. A coalition of Western-educated professionals and business leaders in the Arab world is pushing currently for the return of liberalism.

The elements of liberalism helped usher in Western-type democracy first in Egypt, at the end of the 19th century, and then in a score of Arab countries from the early 1920s to the mid-1950s. The seeds of liberalism were sown in Egypt as early as the turn of the 18th century. When Napoleon's ships anchored in Alexandria's harbor in July 1798, the West had its first significant encounter with the Arab Middle East since the last Crusade, in the 13th

century. Like the other eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt in 1798 was stagnating in medieval Islamic ways that had maintained themselves for centuries—the very centuries during which Europe made its great leaps forward in scientific knowledge, technology, and religious and political reformation. With Napoleon, the French Revolution arrived in full dress on the banks of the Nile.

Among the things the French brought to Egypt were the printing press and a new vocabulary—words for liberty, fraternity, equality, human rights, and



Khedive Ismail and his son Tewfik: One opened the door to liberal reform in 19th-century Egypt, the other slammed it shut.

municipal councils. The Egyptians were intrigued, but soon revolted and pushed the French out with the help of the British and Ottomans. The French took with them their guns but left behind the printing press and the revolutionary slogans. These would have a lasting impact on the emergence of a modern state and society in Egypt.

One of the young Ottoman officers stationed in Egypt at the time, Muhammed Ali, observed the French with great admiration. Shortly after their departure, and with the help of the native ulema (learned men of religion), Muhammed Ali maneuvered his way to becoming Egypt's ruler. Unlike the brief tenure of Napoleon, Muhammed Ali's reign lasted 44 years

(1805–1849). His ambitious state-building led, albeit unintentionally, to the gradual emergence of Egypt's modern civil society and to the nation's first liberal experience.

Muhammed Ali dispatched 311 of Egypt's brightest young men to France, Italy, Austria, and Britain to receive the latest training in all modern fields. He also imported European officers, engineers, and doctors to train Egyptians at home. It's estimated that more than 2,000 native sons benefited from this training. Between 1818 and 1849,

these modern educated Egyptians became the backbone of a new middle class, and from their ranks emerged proponents of liberal values and practices. By the early 1860s, elements of the new middle class were beginning to establish newspapers, theaters, and other organs of civil society, and to advocate liberal politics. In 1866, Khedive Ismail, a fairly enlightened viceroy of Egypt, responded favorably to these liberal aspirations and decreed a constitution that allowed Egypt's first parliamentary elections.

The first parliamentary council in Egypt was quite timid in its early years. But it eventually gained enough self-confidence to challenge the khedive and to stand at the forefront of a revolt in 1881. The deputies simply refused to rubber-stamp a new tax bill without their own audit of the state budget. One of the more outspoken deputies even invoked a slogan of the American Revolution: "No taxation without representation." To quell this unexpected parliamentary defiance, Khedive Tawfik (Ismail's son) issued a decree dissolving the council. But the deputies, to his surprise, refused to disband, and barricaded themselves in the council building. This act of parliamentary defiance triggered an army rebellion, a popular uprising, and demands for "a proper constitution." Khedive Tawfik resorted to external help to put down what was becoming a full-fledged revolution. In 1882, the unrest provoked the British occupation of Egypt, which ended the 16 years of democratic experiment.

Many of Egypt's sociocultural liberal elements endured under the British. Liberalism in Egypt was enhanced by measures protecting private

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property, free trade, and a market economy, all of which further empowered both the landed bourgeoisie and the new middle class. In due course, these groups also became instrumental in resisting British occupation and seeking political

independence and constitutional democracy. Both quests were partly successful, thanks to a popular uprising in 1919. Britain conceded in February 1922 and granted Egypt independence; King Fouad (son of Tawfik and grandson of Ismail) gave his consent to a liberal constitution in 1923. That ushered in a second political cycle of Egyptian liberalism.

Egypt's long liberal saga was paralleled in other Arab countries. Though still nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia managed to gain substantial autonomy at different points in the 19th century, and under the leadership of ambitious modernizers they instituted large-scale socioeconomic and educational reforms that created new middle classes within a single generation. These classes in time became politically assertive, first against the Ottomans (from the mid-19th century to World War I), then against Western

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occupying powers (Britain, France, and Italy) in the period from 1918 to 1939.

In Iraq, the liberal march began with Dawood Pasha, in 1830, and continued under his successor, Medhat Pasha, who was in a hurry to emulate his Egyptian counterpart, Khedive Ismail. Dawood sent young Iraqis to study abroad, brought in foreign trainers, and proposed a constitution for Iraq in 1869, just three years after enactment of the Egyptian constitution. The Iraqi constitution failed to materialize because of Medhat's untimely death, but the fact that a constitution was even proposed reflected a clear trend among several rulers of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The Egyptian and Iraqi liberal scenarios were taken as examples by an energetic Tunisian reformer, Khyir Eldin, and by a local ruler in the province of Mount Lebanon, Bachir al-Shihaby. Though they never matured to the same political level as those of Egypt, the socio-cultural elements introduced by these reformers in Iraq, Tunisia, and Syria outlived their originators.

Among the most salient features of the first Arab liberal age was the growth of civil society. By the end of the 19th century, some 65 civil society organizations had been established. By 1925, the number had jumped nearly fivefold, to 300, and, by

1950, to more than 3,000. Most of the early organizations were welfare associations. Later, others were established to perform educational and developmental tasks. Some, such as cooperatives, clubs, and trade unions, were public and registered, but others were politically motivated secret societies. From the mid-19th century to the time of World War I, these societies were devoted to resisting Ottoman rule; from the 1920s to the 1950s, they resisted Western colonial powers. Most significantly, they served as incubators for many of the leaders of the region's independence movements, who then became the new rulers once independence was won.

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As significant as the role of these civil society groups in the flowering of the first and second cycles of Arab liberalism was the role played by the press. It's remarkable that newspapers sprouted so rapidly in an area of the world with so much illiteracy—and which had not been introduced to the printing press until 1798. In Egypt, the number of newspapers grew over the course of the 19th century from one to 23, and in Lebanon from 3 to 46. The media entrepreneurs in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world were disproportionately Lebanese Christians who had suffered discrimination under the Ottomans. The publications they founded preached liberal values and practices, and their polemical content triggered heated debates—on Darwinism, Marxism, secularism, Arab nationalism, Islamic reformation, female emancipation, unveiling—among prominent thinkers, politicians, and lay readers.

In sum, many of the values and practices thought to be prerequisites for demo-

cratic governance existed in the Arab world as early as the second half of the 19th century. To be sure, these liberal beliefs and practices were prevalent in only a limited stratum of society: modern, educated Arabs. That same stratum had staffed newly established institutions during the reigns of early indigenous reformers in the 19th century, and it led the resistance against Western colonial occupation during the first half of the 20th century. From its ranks came the initial rulers and state-builders after independence.

The form of governance chosen by the new native rulers, in cooperation with the colonial or mandatory authorities, was pluralistic, multiparty, constitutional democracy. It is not surprising that Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan modeled their governments along the lines of a British-type constitutional monarchy, or that Syria and Lebanon modeled theirs after the government of France—always with adaptations to the specific circumstances of each country.

The second cycle of the Arab liberal age came to an end in most countries during the 1950s and 1960s, when it was no more than 30 or 40 years old. Several

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factors caused its early demise, the most immediate being the 1948 Arab defeat in Palestine at the hands of the newly established state of Israel. Brigades from seven Arab countries had been hurriedly ordered into Palestine to suppress the would-

be Jewish state, and Arab public opinion was primed by a demagogic press to expect a victorious mission that would be concluded in one or two weeks. It was to be a “picnic.” Instead, a real war lingered on for several months and ended in humiliating defeat. The returning armies blamed the defeat on their liberal governments. Allegations of corruption and treason flew in all directions and paved the way for a series of military coups d’état—in Syria (1949), Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), Sudan (1958), and Libya (1969).

But there was more to discredit the liberal regimes than the 1948 defeat in Palestine. One cause of widespread discontent was their neglect of the so-called social question. From the 1930s on, Arab critics and foreign observers noted a growing imbalance in the distribution of wealth and power among the various social classes. The imbalance worsened in the 1940s as a result of higher rates of population growth, urbanization, and the stresses of World War II, in which the Arab world was a major theater. With the postwar demobilization, unemployment skyrocketed in Arab urban centers, and fascist, socialist, and Islamic movements had ample opportunity to exploit this state of affairs by fomenting anger among the growing, disenfranchised urban proletariat.

Arab countries with liberal civilian governments were unable to act wholly on their own. Nearly all were tied to their former colonial masters by the strings of foreign aid and foreign military bases on their soil. Four of the countries, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Libya, were constitutional monarchies, and on paper at least, the monarchs were supposed to reign but not rule. But each king meddled exten-



A victorious Gamal Abdel Nasser electrified the Arab world when he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, but his grand vision of pan-Arab unity ended little more than a decade later in defeat and disillusion.

sively in politics, and the elected governments could not act independently of the throne. In the rare cases when they did, they were dissolved, and a minority or transitional cabinet was appointed until new elections were held. Because of the persistent machinations of throne and foreign power, nonelected minority or transitional governments in Egypt and Iraq ruled longer than the majority elected parties had during the liberal age. This state of affairs crippled elected governments and cast doubt on the viability of the entire project of a multiparty democratic system. So when military regimes took over, dissolved political parties, and did away with democracy altogether, few tears were shed.

Though a military coup d'état in reaction to the Arab defeat in Palestine occurred first in Syria (1949), it was Egypt that provided a full-blown archetype for other military regimes, not only in the Arab world but in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The new Egyptian rulers undertook far-reaching distributive measures that dramatically affected class structure, education, and economic life. These measures were meant to address the social question for the less privileged in society—those neglected by government during the liberal age from the 1920s to the 1950s—and the initial response from the targeted constituencies was sup-

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port and enthusiasm. The new regime also addressed deep-seated national sentiments by declaring, very early on, its anti-colonialist, anti-Zionist, and anti-communist orientations. The nationalization of the Suez Canal and the gallant resistance to the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of 1956 enhanced Gamal Abdel Nasser's charisma as a pan-Arab leader.

When, in 1958, Syria and Egypt were joined in what was called the United Arab Republic (UAR), the credibility of Nasser's vision was enhanced. He promised to fulfill the popular demands for social justice, free education, full employment, free health care, the liberation of Palestine, and Arab unification, and for much of the 1950s and 1960s the Arab masses were tantalized. There was enough delivery on some of the promises to keep peoples' expectations alive if not soaring. More sober observers at the time

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questioned the price the people had to pay: a suspension of basic political rights, democracy, and public freedom. Only members of the upper and upper-middle classes (no more than 25 percent of the population) were keen on democracy and liberal freedoms.

That was to change dramatically with the swift Arab defeat at the hands of Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967. The shock paralyzed the Arab masses for weeks. Investigating the causes of the defeat and putting the military commanders responsible for it on trial took months, and as the public began to sense a cover-up, massive demonstrations broke out in all the major cities. The protesters demanded democracy. Nasser responded to the public anger by issuing the "February 28 Declaration" (1968), in which he reiterated his regime's responsibility for the defeat and promised a return to a full democratic system as soon as "the traces of aggression are removed." Nasser died two years later, and it was several more years before his successor, Anwar el-Sadat, waged another war (1973) to remove those "traces of aggression" (the Israeli occupation of Egyptian Sinai). Not until 1976 did Sadat begin the process of restoring democracy.

Just as the 1948 defeat in the Arab-Israeli war expedited the demise of the first Arab liberal regimes, so too did the defeat in 1967 mark the beginning of the end of the Arab radical populist regimes. But though it took only a decade (1949–58) for the liberal regimes to disintegrate in Arab countries, it's taking much longer for their radical populist successors to fall or to change substantially from within. This is much longer than it has taken for democratic systems to be re-instituted elsewhere in the world. One plausible explanation for the protracted transition is the emergence of another radicalism: political Islam.

In the aftermath of the 1967 defeat, the liberal democratic forces that emerged to reclaim the mantle of societal leadership were joined by a variety of Islamic movements. Radical political Islam has had staying power, in both the Arab world and neighboring Muslim countries. Islamic

groups challenged the Sadat regime in Egypt as early as April 1974, and one of them ultimately succeeded in assassinating the president in October 1981. What made the Islamic alternative especially credible was the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. That event gave a great moral boost to advocates of the Islamic vision in several Arab countries, who then posed a serious challenge to the entrenched populist regimes of Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, and Sudan. Only in Sudan did they manage to seize power, through a military coup in 1989. But the blood shed during the Islamists' challenge to regimes in Algeria and Egypt, and the harsh and backward implementation of sharia by the Islamic Salvation Front in Sudan and the Taliban in Afghanistan, in the 1990s, disillusioned many who had been hopeful. Even the revolution in Iran quickly ran out of steam, its version of the Islamic vision discredited by a reign of terror at home and adventurism abroad.

The horrendous attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, have, of course, had consequences well beyond the borders of the United States. One of those consequences may well turn out to be the beginning of the end of politically militant Islam—resulting not so much from the devastating American military reaction as from a painful collective reassessment in the Arab world of the Islamic legacy as it was projected in the last quarter of the 20th century. That legacy will have to be stripped of its cultish millennial aspects if moderation is to be achieved.

In fact, we have begun to see moderation already in Turkey, Morocco, and Bahrain. All three countries held parliamentary elections in late 2002 and early 2003, and in all three, Islamic political parties ran campaigns of tolerance and respect for the rules of democratic governance. One eminent Islamic thinker, Sheikh Gamal al-Banna, who derives some of his credibility from the fact that his brother was the founder of the Muslim Brothers, one of the original Islamist groups, now argues that today's Islamist movements should evolve into Muslim democratic parties akin to the Christian Democratic parties of Western Europe. Should the trend toward moderation continue and extend to other Muslim countries in the Middle East, the prospects for liberal democracy in the region will surely become brighter.

Over the past 30 years, one radical ideology after another in the Arab world has displayed signs of retreat. In some cases, one radical regime gave way to another; in others, more significantly, the existing regime altered its own policies and practices. The first retreat came with the crumbling of Nasser's quasi-socialist pan-Arabism after the military debacle of 1967. In Sudan, Ja'afar

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Numairy (1969–85) shifted rapidly from socialism to capitalism to Islamic radicalism. Libya, the most extreme example, went through several radical phases before it recently capitulated to former Western foes over contested issues of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. And the fall of the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein at the hands of an American-led coalition was so dramatic that many observers predicted the further weakening,

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if not total demise, of other radical regimes in Syria, Libya, Sudan, and non-Arab Iran. Now the predictions are materializing, as evidenced by the retreat from radicalism on the part of the Sudanese, Libyan, and Iranian regimes. By the end of 2003, all three agreed to do what they had resisted for years: remove

weapons of mass destruction, allow international inspections, or, as in Sudan, sign peace agreements to settle internal conflicts.

With every defeat or retreat of Arab radicalism, the door opens for a return of liberalism. In the economic sphere, for example, Egypt and Tunisia were among the countries that began to liberalize their economies after the October War of 1973, partly to attract deposits, remittances, and investments from oil-rich Arab countries. The Gulf War (1991), which liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, opened a new avenue of freedom of expression in the form of Arab satellite TV networks. The best-known of these is the notorious Al-Jazeera, which broadcasts from the small Gulf state of Qatar. But there were others before, and many have been created since, including Arabiya, LBC, and Al-Huriya. The new media have opened up the Arab public space as never before. Competition for an ever-growing audience has improved the professional quality of broadcasts and expanded the margins of freedom even in countries still controlled by the more repressive authoritarian regimes, such as Libya and Syria.

Arab monarchies have been, on the whole, more responsive than their republican counterparts to regional and global developments and domestic demands for change. King Hussein of Jordan and King Hassan of Morocco, for example, made significant political reforms in the 1990s. Both presided over steady democratization, which made possible several parliamentary elections. Their successors, Abdullah II and Mohammad VI, respectively, have continued the practice of relatively fair and honest elections into the 21st century. Opposition groups, including leftists and Islamists, have won seats in those elections, and have occasionally occupied cabinet positions. This has contributed to a marked political stability in both countries, despite the ups and downs of economic conditions.

Mohammad VI, the young king of Morocco, is also leading a social revolution. In November 2003, he urged the Moroccan parliament to approve a radical bill that gives Moroccan women equal rights with men in all matters of mar-



On the road to democracy? Morocco's King Mohammad VI has led the way toward reform in the Arab world.

riage, divorce, child custody, and the like. On January 7, 2004, the king went an extra mile toward accommodating victims of human rights violations during the reign of his father, Hassan II, when he announced the establishment of a national commission on fairness and reconciliation similar to that established by Nelson Mandela in South Africa in 1994. These two measures have added significantly to the growing liberalization of Morocco—and to the popularity of Mohammad.

The leaders of Morocco and Jordan have become role models for Arab royalists in Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. So it's the monarchies that are leading the newest cycle of Arab liberalization, while the republics of Egypt, Syria,

Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya are reluctant and falling behind. The impulse toward liberalization is not merely a function of the kings' good hearts. It's as much a response to growing domestic and external pressures. In Morocco, for example, nongovernmental organizations mushroomed from fewer than 20,000 in 1980 to more than 80,000 in 2003; many of them are human rights and women's advocacy groups that actively network with their European counterparts.

The events of 9/11 and their aftermath focused Western, especially American, attention on the need for broad sociopolitical reform in the Arab Gulf states, and that new interest converged with long-standing domestic demands for reform in those countries. The benign convergence tipped the balance against the old conservative forces, which had long used narrow interpretations of Islam to resist change. The battle is far from over, and occasional reversals are to be expected. But thanks to the steady growth of the new middle classes, the pressure for sustainable reform now has substantial indigenous support. Although Americans watching TV news might assume that Islamists have captured the hearts of the Arab world, the reality is quite different. For example, the latest World Values Survey shows widespread pro-democratic sentiment and opposition to Islamist ideology. More than 70 percent of Jordanians, for example, say that Islamic leaders should not influence politics.

There's a difficulty, however. Because regime change in Iraq was brought about by a hastily assembled coalition of Western powers that, in its continued presence, symbolizes "foreign occupation," a new wave of patriotic-nationalist forces has been unleashed. The danger for the reformists is that they will be viewed by the public as agents not of positive change but of foreign occupation. Thus, the fate of this latest cycle of Arab liberalization is contingent, in part, on how rapidly the visible symbols of foreign occupation can be removed. By the same token, because liberalization and democracy are closely associated with the West, local detractors will continue to resist so long as other outstanding accounts from the colonial legacy remain unsettled—the most potent and complicated of them being the Palestinian question.

It is often said that, for Middle Easterners, history never dies, it merely fades temporarily, only to return again. That certainly seems to be the case with the cycles of liberalism in the Arab world. This time around, though, at least four things are new and different: (1) Countries that did not even exist during earlier cycles are zealously joining the latest wave. (2) Sociopolitical formations that had previously flirted with radical populism or militant Islamism are revising their beliefs and practices to join or draw nearer to liberal forces. (3) The new middle classes, though impoverished in some Arab countries, are growing and steadily reclaiming liberal values and democratic ideas. (4) With the Cold War over, Western powers seem more committed to withdrawing support for dictators and to advancing democratic systems in the Arab world in the hope that more-inclusive regimes will be an antidote to both religious extremism and terrorism. On balance, then, liberal democracies have never had a better chance of taking hold in the Arab world—and surviving. □