



Election fever

The road to enduring political reform in the region remains long and twisted

IT IS election season across the Middle East and North Africa. Turkey held nationwide municipal elections on March 30; Algeria held presidential elections on April 17; parliamentary elections took place in Iraq on April 30; Egypt will be holding presidential elections on May 26-27; Syria, the same in late June; and Lebanon's parliament is required to choose a new president at the end of May. Waiting in the wings for later in the year are Tunisia and, perhaps, the Palestinian Authority.

What do these elections tell us about the countries in which they are being held and the region as a whole?

Ideally, elections serve as a central pillar of a country's governing structures, enabling citizens to choose leaders, hold them accountable for their actions, and remove them if so desired, while insuring that the principle of majority rule does not trample on the fundamental freedoms and rights of individuals and dissenting groups. Doing so provides governments with indispensable legitimacy and their societies with the social cohesion necessary to manage differences and conflicts.

In some cases, this season's elections in the Middle East have been genuinely competitive (Turkey, Iraq). In others, the results were/are foreordained, even if there was a measure of competition (Algeria, Egypt). Presidential elections in war-torn Syria will not even have that pretence. By contrast, the choice of a Lebanese president among the competing factions of Lebanon's confessional mosaic will be, as always, a complex affair.

In general, the various elections point to the durability of authoritarianism in the region's political culture. The Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 suggested that increasingly youthful and politicized Arab societies were no longer willing to accept being passive spectators at the mercy of nepotistic and corrupt ruling elites. Indeed, the political space across the region remains far more contested and pluralist than it had been in previous decades. But the road to enduring political reform remains long and twisted.

Throughout the last decade, Turkey's Islamist-led government has been held up as a model of emulation for those aspiring to establish viable democratic institutions in the Arab world. This was always more of a pious wish than anything else. More recently, Turkey's democratic system has appeared increasingly fragile and less attractive. The recent nationwide municipal elections constituted victory for the embattled Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as his ruling AK Party garnered a commanding 45.6 percent of the vote.

The similarities between Erdoğan's heavy-handed majoritarian democracy and Vladimir Putin's style of governance in Russia, including the domination of the media and the courts, and taking revenge



ZOHRA BENSEMRA / REUTERS

Algeria's wheelchair-bound President Abdelaziz Bouteflika casts his ballot during the presidential election in Algiers, April 17

against political opponents, grow stronger by the day. Turkish society thus remains deeply polarized. Erdoğan will need to decide whether to pursue a fourth term as prime minister or run for president, an office whose powers have not been sufficiently enhanced as he desired.

Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has exhibited similar authoritarian tendencies during his eight years in office. But his powers are far more limited, as post-Saddam Iraq has not been reconstituted as a viable, cohesive state but rather embroiled in sectarian and factional violence, which claimed 10,000 lives in 2013. The official voter turnout was higher than expected (59 percent), but the results may not be known for months, and Maliki's ability to muster a majority of deputies to reelect him remains in doubt. Between radical Sunni violence, the semi-independent Kurdish north, and the internal divisions within Maliki's Shi'ite community, Iraq appears to be Lebanon writ large.

In a sorry spectacle, the Algerian *pouvoir* (the ruling military-bureaucratic elite) trundled out the infirm and wheelchair-bound President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to the voting booth to confirm his election to a fourth term, winning 82 percent of the votes cast. Wary of a return to the horrible civil strife of the 1990s, the Algerian public has not had the stomach for a sustained challenge to the status quo. However, the *pouvoir* will clearly face challenges from its restive youthful population in the years ahead with the outcome uncertain.

Having toppled the elected Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Egypt's ruling elite, led by the popular strongman Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi, is keen to reinforce its legitimacy in the upcoming presidential elections. Veteran leftist politician Hamdeen Sabahi is the sole opposing candidate and Sisi's win is assured. Meanwhile, harsh repression of the Brotherhood and of Egypt's liberal and youthful elements has proceeded apace.

As it has been from the outset, Tunisia remains an exception. The interim parliament's recent passage of an electoral law will enable the transitional government to organize elections, probably in the fall. The measured pace of change, the degree of consensus building, and the efforts by the main secular and Islamist parties alike to avoid excessive confrontation holds out the promise for achieving a post-election coalition government that will seek to address the country's underlying economic and social problems while maintaining cohesion and social stability.

Aspiring democrats elsewhere can only look on in envy. ■

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