MIDEAST MONITOR: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Not Much to Celebrate

THIS YEAR MARKS THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE collapse of the East Bloc and the end of the Cold War. Symbolically, the breaching and dismantling of the Berlin Wall by throngs of ordinary German citizens was the single most powerful image of that event-filled year. But for Middle Eastern rulers and publics alike, the sight of Romania's long-ruling dictator Nicolae Ceausescu lying dead in a roadside ditch was no less poignant. Was this, as many in the region hoped, the inevitable fate of its dictators? Would "civil society" reemerge as a decisive force, after decades of domination by repressive authorities, as many Western academics theorized?

The answer to the first question was, not surprisingly, no. Very little is inevitable in history, in part because it is heavily contingent on the actions of individuals. Saddam Hussein is the single Middle Eastern dictator to have fallen from power in the last 20 years, and he had only himself to blame. Most regimes have used the tools of power more wisely than he, enabling them to survive turbulent times.

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As for the reemergence of civil society, this proved to have been a pious wish. Genuinely democratic civil society, i.e., the existence of a strong network of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions outside the realm of the state, requires the rule of law, alternative centers of economic power, and self-restraint by the authorities, all of which are in short supply in the Arab world and Iran.

This is not to say, however, that the Middle East region has entirely stagnated during this period. Broadly speaking, in most countries there is now a greater degree of pluralism in political life. Issues related to women's status and the environment are now squarely on the public agenda. Governments no longer have a complete monopoly in the information sphere, thanks to satellite TV dishes and the Internet. NGOs have proliferated, often in cooperation with, and support from, Western institutions and organizations.

Still, the balance between state authorities and non-state forces remains decisively in favor of the former, and Islamic movements, hardly the standard bearers of democratic values, remain the only viable political opposition in most places.

Evidence for these themes is provided by a variety of recent developments in the Greater Middle East. The latest index on world press freedom, issued by the reputable "Reporters Without Borders," ranks most Middle Eastern states extremely low (www.rsf.org). For example, Kuwait and Lebanon, where press freedom is the highest from among Arab countries, are placed at 60 and 61, respectively, out of 175 countries. Morocco ranks 127, with the situation there having deteriorated markedly in recent years. Algeria stands at 142, Egypt 146, Tunisia 154, and Syria 165. As for Iran, it "has now reached the gates of the infernal trio at the very bottom – Turkmenistan (173), North Korea (174) and Eritrea (175) – where the media are so suppressed they are non-existent" (more on Iran below).

In Saudi Arabia, ranked 163, a small "victory" was recently achieved as King Abdallah pardoned a Saudi female journalist who had been sentenced by a court to receive 60 lashes for being an employee of a Lebanese TV station that had broadcast an interview with a Saudi man talking openly about his sex life!

Elections are fairly common in the Middle East, but are problematic exercises, to say the least. In the so-called "presidential monarchies" (e.g. Egypt and Syria), they are designed to confirm the power of the ruling authorities. For example, Tunisia, one of the region's more politically repressive countries, just reelected Zayn Abidine Ben-Ali to his fifth five-year term, with 89.62% of the vote. His opponents were unknown and barely mentioned in the Tunisian media.

In countries with more competitive political arenas, such as Morocco and Jordan, elections are devices to let off steam and balance the influence of different social groups while maintaining the regime's underlying authority. In fractured Lebanon, last spring's parliamentary elections confirmed the country's deep divisions, leaving the political system paralyzed.

Elections in the Palestinian Authority areas are scheduled to be held in January 2010, but the depth of the Hamas-Fatah rift makes it difficult to envisage this happening smoothly, if at all. In this case, as elsewhere, politics are seen as a zero-sum game, without any overarching commitment to the common good. Post-Saddam Iraq, where hundreds of people continue to be killed every month, looks more and more like fractured Lebanon writ large, with its much-heralded elections confirming the country's deep ethnic divisions without producing the needed consensus on power-sharing. The next ones, scheduled to be held in January, are floundering over disagreement on electoral procedures for oil-rich and ethnically mixed Kirkuk.

And finally, there's Iran. Long held up as a country with genuinely competitive pluralist politics and considerable intellectual and cultural production, the recent electoral fraud and brutal repression of mass protests may have succeeded, but it also called the regime's legitimacy into question as never before. Still, the Ceausescu model is not currently applicable in Tehran, notwithstanding the ongoing nighttime rooftop chants of "Death to the Dictator."

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