

# The Resilience of Authoritarianism

BY HICHAM BENABDALLAH



IN ADVANCE OF MOROCCO'S SEPTEMBER 2007 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, A DEMONSTRATOR IN RABAT HOLDS A POSTER READING "NO TO HOLLOW DEMOCRACY". (REUTERS/RAFAEL MARCHANTE)

**SINCE THE FIRST GULF WAR**, most authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have been able to maintain structures of governance that have endured since the post-World War II process of decolonization. We have not seen the emergence of agents of change capable of mounting effective political challenges. Regimes that often seemed to be losing international and domestic credibility have been able to remake themselves in ways that worked to maintain power and control.

The new movements and agents of change that did appear have not had the hoped-for transformative results, and regimes were able to accommodate most new challenges. Over the last 20 years in the region and the world — in the socioeconomic, political, ideological, and international dimensions — the results have ended up disappointing expectations. Neo-liberal economic policies did not transform the economies of the region in a way that led to new solutions to social problems. New middle classes did not achieve the political independence necessary to overcome old structures of patronage and transform regimes. The middle class, rather, became disengaged from local politics, and many social groups came to look for hope outside the national context. Furthermore, different social classes, as well as secular and Islamic elements, had divergent perspectives regarding democracy. Secular groups seek a rights-based order, based on modern political principles, while Islamist voices want a doctrines-based political order founded on traditional scriptural precepts. These divergences make a unified, forceful challenge to authoritarianism more difficult.

In fact, regimes have been able to adapt to different demands and manipulate the tensions among different social actors, to reconfigure the apparatus of authoritarianism. Regimes learned to pose as protectors of moderation against extremism and to adopt limited reforms, which absorbed and deflected demands for democratization. In this way, regimes have constructed simulacra of civil society and upgraded the accoutrements of authoritarianism.

Meanwhile, behind the historical mythologies of nationalism and unity, currents of social and ideological tension remain and are now embedded in an international context of fear and crisis. After 2001, many regimes feared that the Bush Administration's proclaimed fervor for democracy promotion would upend the implicit 60-year old pact of stability between the states in our region and the West. The Arab public and later the regimes were quick to interpret the fervor for democracy as a cover for the neocon agenda of military intervention. Local regimes quickly learned to read the subtext of the mixed messages from the West. A facade of democracy would suffice, as long as there was cooperation in the "war on terror."

From Iraq to Pakistan, then, the international context of violence and intervention poses new challenges to democratization. The distortions introduced by the war on terror, including the internationalization of *l'état sécuritaire* (heightened security state) and the parallel internationalization of *jihadi* militancy, have provided more excuses for authoritarian regimes and have reinforced the most retrograde aspects of governance.

Finally, there is no perfect mechanism of accommodation or cooptation. Social and political tensions persist. Change remains possible, most likely from lateral as opposed to frontal actions and from surprising new actors like the jurists in Egypt and Pakistan and new theologians throughout the Islamic world. Because the language of democratization itself has now been largely discredited in Arab public opinion, seen as a hypocritical cover for an agenda of preemptive military attack, opportunistic regime change, and foreign interference in general, we must reestablish new fundamentals for a discourse of change. In this new context, for any kind of democratization to occur, it is crucial that we "re-indigenize" the message of progressive change in the countries of the regions. We must create a renewed sense of shared purpose that includes the nation and Islam but is not confined by them and that speaks to people's local concerns while it connects them to wider projects of peace and democracy in the region and the world.