

The Place of Democracy in the Postcolonial Islamic World

Juan Cole

The administration of George W. Bush pursued an announced policy of democratization in the Greater Middle East. In that era, Washington initiated, or presided over the initiation of, three democratic transitions in the Middle East: in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. It also sought to pressure Egypt to adopt more open democratic procedures. By “democracy,” Bush appears to have meant a Schumpeterian process wherein there are regular free elections in which the public chooses its leaders, in which there are winners and losers and in which the losers depart.¹ This criterion is therefore a

1 Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political*

good one whereby to judge the outcomes. Bush's policies in this regard were referred to as "muscular Wilsonianism," and were articulated by administration spokesmen within the framework of his "war on terror." None of the transitions attempted could be called a success, and it could be argued that in important regards all failed. In contrast, two years into the administration of his successor, Barack Obama, many Arab countries witnessed grassroots movements for democracy that, in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, seem likely to have some success. Why did Bush's initiatives fail, whereas subsequent grassroots movements have had some success?

Bush left the legacy of fragile or failed democratic transitions to Barack Obama. The Obama administration, largely adopting a Realist foreign policy, tried to pursue pragmatic policies but was stymied by disputed elections, religious extremism and hastily or badly drafted constitutions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Its cautious realism, ironically enough, in some ways came into conflict with the idealism of the youth, women's and workers' movements that broke out in winter-spring 2010-2011. It will be argued that fragile states only claiming to be democracies have often fallen to insurgent challengers, and Obama is in the position of attempting to implement

Regimes and Economic Well-being in the World, 1950-1990, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000; Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, New York, Harper, 1942.

strong policies (withdrawal from Iraq, counter-insurgency in Afghanistan, a two-state solution in Palestine and Israel) with weak, deeply divided and often absolutist partners whose rise was engineered or accidentally fostered by his predecessor.

The mantra of democratization under Bush strangely mixed pragmatic policy considerations with an idealistic rhetoric. The Neoconservatives in particular argued that authoritarian governance contributed to the rise of Muslim fundamentalist terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, and that a democratizing Middle East would produce more eufunctional societies. They often implied, without explicitly saying so, that the authoritarian states were more likely to scapegoat Israel, and so to foment anti-Semitism and anti-Israel terrorism, than would be democratically elected regimes that had less need to take the minds of the public off their lack of popular sovereignty. A further subtext of the discourse about democratization concerned economic liberalization. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is said to have characterized regimes such as Baathist Iraq and Syria as “Stalinist holdovers” (Wesley Clarke), and to have argued in the 1990s that the US had a window of only 15 years as the sole superpower to put an end to them before challengers such as China arose that might limit US freedom of action. These theorists appeared to have earlier hoped that after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Middle East would take the same path as Poland and the Czech

Republic in Eastern Europe, turning toward democratic, multiparty politics and neoliberal economic policies. When that development did not occur, they appear to have decided that the sort of changes that rolled through Eastern Europe in the 1990s could be provoked by external, US intervention. Democratization by military intervention or diplomatic shaming and strong-arming, then, was intended to produce a series of velvet revolutions in the Middle East that would strengthen the US and Israeli diplomatic, military and economic position in this energy- and resource-rich region.

Important contradictions in US policy should be noted, especially the inconsistent application of muscular Wilsonianism. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Jordan, Tunisia, and the Gulf oil states, among others, were largely exempted from Bush's pressure in this direction. All were characterized by deeply pro-American authoritarian regimes that lent their facilities and security forces to support for the "war on terror." They either had a peace treaty with Israel (Jordan) or practically speaking had an entente with it. In contrast, pre-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan were both anti-American and anti-Israel. Egypt looks more like the regimes that were exempted from pressure for democratization, having a peace treaty with Israel and good relations with the United States, and it is a little mysterious why it was singled out for public opprobrium and pressure by Bush. The 2006 elections in the Palestine Authority had long been scheduled, and so

were not a Bush administration initiative, but the administration did attempt at first to fit them into its over-arching narrative of democratization.

Democratic transitions have often succeeded in the past four decades. Spain, South Korea, Taiwan, Poland, Brazil, and many other examples could be cited. On the other hand, the democracy protesters at Tiananmen Square in China (1989) and those in Burma (1990) were crushed. Algeria's brief experiment with open elections was ended by its military in 1992 when the Muslim fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Party won.² Mark Katz, drawing on the work of Crane Brinton, sees the question of whether the military supports the move to democratization as a key variable in explaining success or failure. But democratization is extremely complex, and other variables must be considered. One does not need higher math to see that the smoothest and most successful such transitions have occurred in wealthier countries. Adam Przeworski and his colleagues argue that increased gross national product does not predict whether or not a country will begin a transition to democracy—such transitions begin for many possible reasons and are somewhat arbitrary. But they argue that a country's

2 Mark N. Katz, "Democratic Revolutions: Why some Succeed, Others Fail," prepared for delivery at the 2003 Annual Conference of the American Political Science Association, August 28-August 31, 2003, at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/6/2/7/2/pages62723/p62723-1.php.

level of income is highly correlated with whether or not the transition to democracy succeeds, with poorer countries more often failing.

My argument here will set aside the question of the most salient reasons for which the Bush administration invaded Afghanistan and Iraq or pressed for a Palestinian state. Nor will I consider the issue of whether the democratization program was sincere or cynical. That is, my object of inquiry is not the motives or decision-making of Washington but rather the shape and the aftermath of its policies in the Middle East. The question I will pose is the degree to which the transitions to democracy succeeded in each of the four Bush initiatives, and the reasons for success or failure in each. I will then turn to the reasons for which popular movements accomplished what Bush could not.

Let us take the least complicated, if most baffling Bush policy first, that toward Egypt. Although Egyptian reform played a relatively minor role in Bush administration policy, the 2005 presidential elections and the 2006 elections for Egypt's lower house provoked substantial turbulence in Bush's relationship with President Hosni Mubarak. Under Bush administration pressure, Mubarak had parliament amend the constitution with regard to the selection of the president, which had earlier been carried out by a vote of parliament and then a popular referendum ratifying parliament's choice. The new procedure allowed for multiparty popular elections

for president. In June of 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice came to Cairo and called for the elections to be free and open, risking harming relations with Mubarak. Mubarak, who won a crushing victory, was later accused of using state resources to bus supporters to the polls. One of his opponents, Ayman Nur, appears to have been let out of jail briefly only for appearances sake, such as the appearances were. After the elections, in which he was permitted to gain 7 percent of the vote, he was summarily returned to prison.

The following year Egypt held elections for the lower house of parliament. The Muslim Brotherhood, which had held 17 seats, increased its bloc to 88. The Brotherhood is not allowed to run under its own banner, since purely religious parties are banned in Egypt. Other small parties are often willing to run Brotherhood candidates, however, if they think they can win in a particular constituency. Elections in Mubarak's Egypt were more a symbolic public ritual reaffirming state power than voters' choice of legitimate representatives, and bussed crowds, vote-buying, ballot fraud, and police coercion and interference in the vote counting are widely alleged to have been integral parts of the process. For the Brotherhood to improve its performance so dramatically under such circumstances raised questions of whether the state did not allow them to do so in order to send a message to Washington that pressure for democratization would backfire. If so, the ploy was successful, since

Bush's muscular Wilsonianism was never again trained on Cairo in a public way in succeeding years, nor did the succeeding Obama administration make fair elections in Egypt a priority until the people themselves pitched the issue.

The failure of Bush's pressure on Egypt to open up and initiate a genuine democratic transition derived from some key weaknesses in the policy. Bush needed Egyptian logistical and political support for his Iraq war, and so could hardly press the Mubarak regime too ferociously on this issue. Although it is true that the US gives Egypt \$1.5 billion a year in aid, half of it civilian and half military, this aid could not be used as a carrot for democratization. First of all, the aid for the most part actually goes to American corporations, which in turn provide made goods or military weaponry to Egypt, and cutting it off would hurt US concerns. Second, the aid is an ongoing bribe to Egypt to remain at peace with Israel, and it is a little unlikely that Congress would have been willing to jeopardize Israel's security for the sake of pressuring Egypt with the threat of an aid cut-off. Other than this strategic rent, the United States, had few significant assets in Egypt, whether political, diplomatic or military, and so had little leverage other than mere hectoring by Dr. Rice. Although Mubarak did permit multiparty presidential elections, few observers believe that the election was free and fair, and neither Washington's pressure nor internal activism by the middle class Ghad or

Tomorrow Party and the Kifaya or “Enough!” movement was sufficiently strong to challenge the hold on power of Egypt’s soft military dictatorship. (That Mubarak is an air force general and was made vice president by Anwar El Sadat in part for that reason, so that he came to power after the latter’s assassination, is sometimes now forgotten.) The Egyptian security police (“Amn al-Dawlah”) and military, firmly in control of the country, was deeply unsympathetic to the move toward political openness being urged by Bush and Rice, and they intervened to halt it. The “safety valve” obtained by the regime from having some 3 million workers abroad (out of a work force of about 25 million), and the dependence of the middle class on government and government-related jobs, all militated against a successful opening in the Bush period. That the opening was being forced from the outside probably also detracted from its legitimacy.

In contrast to Egypt, the Bush administration conquered and administered Afghanistan and Iraq and was central to the formation of new regimes in both countries. There is no mystery as to why Afghanistan’s democratic transition has been troubled and may well have, as of the fraudulent parliamentary elections of September, 2010, failed altogether. Afghanistan is among the least suitable candidates for a successful transition to democracy in the world, just on the face of it. Its nominal annual per capita income is only about \$500. It is deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines, having Sunni Tajiks, Sunni Pathans,

Shiite Hazaras, Sunni Uzbeks and even Ismailis. It has been torn by war since the late 1970s. A history of violence plagued the country, against the pro-Soviet Tajiks by both Tajik and Pashtuns, among the Mujahidin themselves after they came to power in 1992, between them and the largely Pashtun Taliban from 1994, and then between Pashtun guerrillas and US and NATO forces and their ally, the new Afghanistan National Army, after 2001. The wars of the 1980s and 1990s were extremely disruptive. They displaced 3 million, mostly Pashtuns, to refugee camps in Pakistan. Two million mostly Tajik Persian speakers fled to Iran. Two million were displaced internally. At least a million were killed in the fighting, and probably 3 million wounded. Large numbers of widows, orphans, and abandoned families strove to survive, inside the country or in camps abroad. The mass displacements, killings and woundings of 11 million persons over these decades is an astonishing statistic given that the population of the country in the 1980s may have been as small as 16 million (it is now estimated at 30 million).

Afghanistan is not a society easy to mobilize for mass politics. Some 75 percent of the population is rural, and as many as 10 percent are still pastoral nomads. There are no powerful unions or chambers of commerce. There are not even enough police to do routine policing. Urban institutions are overwhelmed by the rapid influx of workers fleeing the insecurity of the countryside. The Karzai regime ensconced in Kabul,

initially by the US via the international Bonn Process in late 2001, and reinforced by subsequent elections, has never allowed political parties to be founded and to engage in organizing and canvassing, so that elections are held on a non-party basis. The most organized institutions in the country are kinship groups (tribes and clans), guerrilla groups such as the Taliban and the Hizb-i Islami, and poppy growers and smugglers, whose activities account for a third of the gross national product. The heavy dependence of an economy on a single high-priced commodity is a predictor of social violence, which is in turn a predictor of low rates of success in democratic transitions. Afghanistan's poppies and heroin are a continual source of conflict and destabilization, fuelling feuds and narco-terrorism.

In addition to these local, social problems that make democratization in Afghanistan an almost fairy tale endeavor, the history of the American and NATO occupation of the country since 2003 is replete with further difficulties. The American use of air power to fight the small remaining insurgency, in the course of which many innocent villagers were accidentally slaughtered, appears to have alienated ever more Pashtuns from the foreign troops. The decision to garrison Afghanistan with large foreign troop contingents provoked nationalist opposition in some areas of the country, especially Pashtun provinces such as Qandahar, Helmand, Khost, Paktika, Ghazni and so forth. The Karzai government suffered from being seen as a

puppet of white Christian foreign patrons. Karzai proved an obsessive micromanager of affairs in Kabul and altogether unconcerned with governing the rest of the country (he is said to control only about a third of it). He and his brothers became known as the Karzai gang, for the questionable activities of some of the brothers, accused of financial corruption or involvement in the drug trade, a reputation that further hurt his legitimacy.

Karzai acted high-handedly during the August, 2009, presidential elections, which were marked by widespread fraud. By mid-September, his leading opponent, Abdallah Abdallah, was charging Karzai with using state resources to engineer the stealing of the August 20 presidential election, and even accusing Karzai of treason. Abdallah said that Karzai bribed tribal elders between \$4,000 and \$8,000 each to throw the election to Karzai. Abdallah insisted on a run-off election, required only if no candidate receives at least 50 percent of the vote. Abdallah believed that the votes that put Karzai up to 54 percent were at least in part fraudulent and the result of vote-buying with state monies.³

There were two oversight bodies for the election, the inaccurately named Independent Election Commission, the members of which were appointed by Karzai, and the Electoral Complaints Commission, which had three

3 “Full probe into rigging would lead to run-off, says Afghan leader’s main rival,” Tolo TV, Kabul, in Dari 1800 gmt 17 Sep 09, *BBC Monitoring – South Asia*, via *Lexis Nexis*.

Western members appointed by the United Nations and two Afghan members. The Afghan members were appointed by the Supreme Court and the Independent Election Commission. The Independent Election Commission unsurprisingly supported Karzai and was willing to certify the election as aboveboard. The UN-dominated Electoral Complaints Commission, however, put its foot down, insisted on a recount and threw out over a million votes that it determined were fraudulent. The recount reduced the incumbent's proportion of the vote to 48 percent and looked set to force Karzai into a run-off with Abdallah by October, but the latter withdrew from the race on the grounds that the Karzai-appointed Independent Election Commission could not be trusted to oversee upright elections in the second round more scrupulously than it had in the first. Karzai might have won the 2009 election anyway, but the process was too flawed to allow a clear answer to that question. It seems clear that democratization in Afghanistan, if by that is meant elections marked by transparency in which the loser agrees to vacate the office, has decisively failed.

Not only had Karzai packed the Independent Election Commission but in February 2010 he took control of the supposedly actually-independent Electoral Complaints Commission, announcing that he would appoint all 5 of its members, cutting out the United Nations.⁴

4 "Karzai kontrol-i komisiyon-i intikhabat ra dar dast-i khud girift," Radio Azadi, 5/12/1388 (Feb. 24, 2010) at <http://da.azadiradio.com/content/article/1966580.html>.

The subsequent parliamentary elections of September, 2010, could not be held in 20 percent of the country because of security concerns (the Taliban forbade participation in the voting and threatened reprisals). There were allegations of widespread fraud, with some 4,000 subsequent complaints flooding in.

Democracy in Afghanistan was thwarted for a number of reasons. A largely rural country with a 28 percent literacy rate that is the fifth poorest nation in the world was not a very good candidate to succeed in the first place. The new Afghanistan National Army is widely believed to be corrupt, and the officer corps was appointed by Karzai, giving him a behind the scenes ally. Much of the country is not in government control, and the state does not have by any means a monopoly on the use of violence. Indeed, armed groups roam much of the country at will, and security is poor.

The adoption of a counter-insurgency doctrine by the US military under President Barack Obama in some ways indebted Washington to the Karzai government and made it difficult or impossible for outside agencies to challenge Karzai's various power-grabs. He was publicly warned to conduct aboveboard elections by no less than Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. When he instead engaged in electoral fraud, and emerged as the winner under questionable circumstances, the Obama administration had little choice but to acquiesce. Its counter-insurgency doctrine required a reliable local political partner who could gain

the allegiance of the populace. While it seemed increasingly unlikely that Karzai could fulfill that role, no plausible alternative was on the horizon. Since Abdullah Abdullah's main power base was the Tajiks, whereas Pashtuns supported Karzai in much greater numbers, an Abdullah victory could well have worsened the insurgency, led mainly by aggrieved Pashtuns who had joined Muslim fundamentalist groups.

The Iraqi transition was if anything more troubled than that of Afghanistan. It suffered from many of the same disabilities. Iraq's per capita real income every year when the US first invaded in 2003 was only \$800 a year. Although it is \$2,000 or more in 2010, some of that increase is illusory. Petroleum production and prices have risen, but there is little reason to think that the income has trickled down to the people. The actual per capita income, once petroleum is subtracted, is therefore likely still quite low. On the other hand, as with poppies in Afghanistan, the presence of a high-priced primary commodity (in Iraq's case petroleum), combined with a weak central government, has led to very substantial gasoline smuggling and to violence among militias, gangs and tribes competing for control of the refineries and smuggling routes.

Iraq is a multiethnic society, with Shiite Arabs in the south and center, Sunni Arabs in the center and north, and mostly Sunni Kurds in the north, along with smaller groups such as Turkmen (about evenly split between

Sunnis and Shiites). The secular Baath government, dominated (though not exclusively so) by Sunni Arabs had massacred Kurds in 1988 out of suspicion they were tilting to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and seeking independence. In the wake of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, when Shiites rose up in the south, the Baath military put the rebellion down with great brutality and was said to have killed as many as 60,000. After the fall of the Baath in 2003 at Anglo-American hands and the rise of a new government dominated by Shiites and Kurds, a Sunni Arab insurgency waged a deadly campaign of violence against the new order. In 2006-2007, civil war broke out between Sunnis and Shiites, leading to the ethnic cleansing of most Sunnis from Baghdad. Violence was also common, though not on the same scale, between Kurds and Arabs in the north. This history of deep ethnic divisions and grievances, and ongoing ethnic violence, posed profound obstacles to any democratic transition after 2003.

It is not clear that the Bush administration was dedicated to a thoroughgoing democratization of the country in any case. Indeed, the administration went through post-conquest plans one after another. At first the Department of Defense was determined to install Ahmad Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress in power, rather on the model of Karzai in Afghanistan. A national congress with hand-picked delegates was initially planned. The State Department discovered this plan and won an internal battle to

scuttle it, with President George W. Bush sending Paul Bremer as civil administrator. With the growth of a Sunni guerrilla movement through summer, 2003, and the massive explosion at the shrine of Ali in Najaf on August 29, 2003, which killed Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, it became increasingly clear that Bremer could not hope to rule Iraq. (Al-Hakim was the leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, among the foremost political parties among the Shiites, and his death caused confidence in American competence among Bush's Shiite allies to collapse.) In November of 2003, Bush and Bremer announced yet another plan, to hold "caucus-based" elections. The plan was to assemble the members of the provincial and some municipal councils that had been massaged into being by the State Department and its civilian subcontractors, who were Iraqi notables willing to cooperate with the British and Americans, and have them elect a prime minister. This plan was rejected by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who demanded open, one-person, one vote elections. He won, and Bush was forced to schedule them for January, 2005. In the meantime the US and the UN, in consultation with Bremer's appointed Interim Governing Council, selected Iyad Allawi, an ex-Baathist and a CIA asset who had worked in London in the 1990s to recruit defecting members of the Baath officer corps for coup attempts against Saddam Hussein.

The January, 2005, elections in Iraq did not meet international standards. Most candidates could not campaign because of the poor security. A closed list system was used, so that voters had little idea for whom they were voting, though they could pick a list on the basis of its announced ideology. Voters were in some danger as they voted, and most had to walk to neighborhood polling stations because of a lockdown of vehicle traffic. The Sunni Arab population boycotted the vote almost in its entirety, producing a parliament dominated by the fundamentalist Shiite parties, with the Kurdistan Alliance as their junior partners. The Shiite parties elected Ibrahim Ja`fari Prime Minister. A physician, he headed the returned London branch of the Da`wa Party, founded in the late 1950s to work for a Shiite, Islamic state in Iraq. The December, 2005, parliamentary elections produced the same results, though this time the Sunni Arabs joined the vote, returning Sunni fundamentalist MPs for the most part.

In the wake of the parliamentary elections, a movement grew to remove Ibrahim Ja`fari. He had alienated the Kurds by going to Ankara and discussing with Turkey how to prevent the oil-rich province of Kirkuk from being annexed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. He had alienated the Americans by his closeness to Iran and by his ineffectiveness as a leader. The Shiite clerical leadership in Najaf was disturbed at his inability to tamp down the political violence afflicting the country. And so the US and the Kurds put pressure on the Shiite coalition,

the United Iraqi Alliance, to choose an alternative. It held a party congress and Nuri al-Maliki of the Da'wa Party narrowly won out over Adil Abdul Mahdi of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, largely because al-Maliki's Da'wa support was augmented by that of the Sadr Movement of Muqtada al-Sadr, which had been brought into the United Iraqi Alliance in fall of 2005 as part of a united Shiite front for the parliamentary elections. While these events had the outward form of a democracy, insofar as an election was held and those elected took office, and those defeated went home, the reality was more sordid. Many of the parties sitting in parliament were intertwined with the militias fighting in the streets, who would ultimately decide the shape of power. The prime minister was removed in some large part through the insistence of the American ambassador. The situation rather resembled that of India or Lebanon under British and French colonial rule, where there were also parliamentary elections in the absence of true popular sovereignty, with often heavy-handed foreign intervention.

Al-Maliki had come to power through the support of the Sadrist faction of Shiite fundamentalists, which maintained a Mahdi Army paramilitary. Initially, al-Maliki depended heavily on the Mahdi Army as his own military arm, since the newly trained Iraqi military did not yet amount to much and in any case was not known to be loyal to the prime minister. In the summer of 2007, the

leader of the Sadrists and their Mahdi Army, Muqtada al-Sadr, led a campaign to have al-Maliki cease meeting and teleconferencing with George W. Bush, and to have the prime minister set a specific timetable for the withdrawal of US troops from the country. Al-Maliki declined to be so pressured, and the Sadrists withdrew from the government, sitting thereafter in the opposition benches. Al-Maliki, furious, at first turned for support to another Shiite fundamentalist group, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, led by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim. ISCI had its own paramilitary, the Badr Corps, which had originally been formed and trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps when ISCI was in exile in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2007, as part of the Bush troop escalation, the US military under Gen. David Petraeus put pressure on the Mahdi Army, and Muqtada al-Sadr, its clerical leader, was forced to flee to Iran and to declare his militia disbanded. Al-Maliki, apparently wary of being political hostage to one party-militia after another, gradually established forward operating bases in the Shiite south, to which he detailed regular army field officers who were induced to report directly to the prime minister. He thereby bypassed both the US Pentagon and CIA and his own minister of defense (who had hardly been a Maliki loyalist).

In spring of 2008, al-Maliki deployed the new Iraqi army against Mahdi Army positions in Basra. Initially

the campaign went poorly, with some pro-Sadr elements in the military defecting. But in the end, the new military defeated the Mahdi Army, it is said with help from the Badr Corps. Al-Maliki is then said to have inducted thousands of Badr Corps fighters into the army. He then sent the army against the Mahdi Army in Nasiriya and in Sadr City (East Baghdad), defeating it and making it lie low in each instance. Al-Maliki's success in becoming a military leader admittedly depended very heavily on American logistics help and on US close air support for his operations. Al-Maliki went on to establish tribal militias among Shiites in the south that also reported directly to him. His political adversaries accused him of making a soft coup and becoming a behind the scenes military dictator. But compared to his predecessor, the ineffectual and virtually powerless Jaafari, al-Maliki had begun making the prime ministership of Iraq count for something with regard to power politics for the first time since Nouri al-Sa'id in the 1940s and 1950s.

The parliamentary elections of March 7, 2010, resulted in a near-majority for the Shiite religious parties, as in the previous two elections. This time, however, they had split into two major factions, and found it difficult to form another coalition with one another. Al-Maliki had alienated the movement of Muqtada al-Sadr by his 2008 military move against it. The election thus resulted in a hung parliament, with four major blocs. These included the Iraqiya List of Iyad Allawi, which grouped secular

middle class Shiites and Sunnis, but in this election became a largely Sunni Arab party, and which gained 91 seats. Coming in second with 89 seats was the State of Law coalition of incumbent prime minister al-Maliki, at the core of which was his Da'wa or Islamic Mission Party, along with smaller Shiite religious parties. The third largest bloc, at 70 seats, was the National Iraqi Alliance, which consisted of the more fundamentalist religious parties, including the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), led by cleric Ammar al-Hakim, the Sadr Bloc, led by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and some other smaller factions. The Sadrists gained almost 40 seats out of the 70, and so were the weightiest bloc within this coalition. The fourth bloc was the Kurdistan Alliance. Forming a government required three of them to ally with one another so as to gain a majority (163 out of 225 seats).

Both before and after the election, the Justice and Accountability Commission, led by corrupt financier and political operator Ahmad Chalabi, attempted to disqualify Iraqiya candidates on grounds of their having had too strong a connection to the old, banned, Baath Party. This commission's work threatened to unravel the whole election, and its witch hunts cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the electoral process as far as Sunni Arabs were concerned. Its two most prominent members were themselves members of the National Iraqi Alliance, and so could be seen as acting for partisan purposes rather than neutral, national ones.

In the months after March, interminable wrangling went on. Guerrilla and militia groups took advantage of the interregnum to take turf and engage in destabilizing operations. The US government made a concerted effort to install as prime minister, or at least as a high official with power over the security forces, its old client, Iyad Allawi, whose Iraqiya party had attracted the allegiance of some 80 percent of the Sunni Arabs, who had swung back toward their traditional secularism in 2010. Allawi was emboldened by American backing to decline to make a more realistic political deal, further delaying the formation of a government. It may also be that by then the new officer corps had been so extensively coopted by al-Maliki that for it to swing around and give its loyalty to Allawi was a little implausible. While his argument, that the Iraqi constitution specifies that the largest bloc in parliament be asked by the president to form the government, was correct, he did not seem to understand that such a request would only present an opportunity to attempt to put together the 163 seats needed to govern, and did not imply an automatic accession to power. Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni and a prominent member of the Iraqiya List, expressed anxiety and concern over the meetings in Tehran of the Shiite parties—which aimed at cobbling back together the Shiite alliance. He denounced them as naked interference by a neighbor in Iraq’s internal affairs. He also argued that the next president of Iraq

should be an Arab and not a Kurd.⁵ Al-Hashimi's denunciation of the Shiites as cat's paws of Iran and his urging that the Kurds be marginalized did not help Allawi to form a government, since he needed pro-Iran Shiites as well as Kurds to do so.

At the same time, Iran made efforts to convince the Shiite parties to reestablish their old alliance, and actually called party leaders and newly elected members of parliament to Tehran for the purpose of forging a coalition between al-Maliki's State of Law and the NAI. These efforts initially foundered on the opposition to al-Maliki of Muqtada al-Sadr. By the beginning of October, 2010, however, Iranian insistence had worn down al-Sadr, resident in the seminary city of Qom, and al-Maliki for his part appears to have offered sufficient inducements for the Sadrists to join with the State of Law and finally form a government with the help of the Kurdistan Alliance. In September and October of 2010, as well, the Obama administration's objections to al-Maliki appear to have abruptly evaporated, or perhaps it finally became clear to Washington that Allawi's 91 seats did him no good, since he could not find the partners that would take him to 163. Any role for the new Iraqi military in these maneuverings was never adverted to in the Iraqi press and it probably was not central. That, however, al-Maliki had

5 Huda Jasim and Ma'd Fayyad, "Al-Hashimi li al-Sharq al-Awsat: Qaliquun min al-Hiwarat allati tajri fi Tihran," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 30, 2010.

successfully deployed the military to restore a modicum of security to Basra, that many officers were loyal to him, and that he had his own tribal militias, were certainly points in his favor, with the electorate, with potential coalition partners (other than the Sadrists), with Iran, and with the US.

Though al-Maliki finally formed a government in November, 2010, long months of indecision deeply wounded the Iraqi public's faith in the electoral process and one could not exactly say that Iraq had had a successful transition to democracy. Iranian and American intervention is still heavy-handed and widely resented. Al-Maliki's survival into a second term does not directly contradict the democratic model, since it depended on ordinary Westminster-model parliamentary elections and post-election coalition-building. But had he not also been a military leader and had he not had the fierce support of Iran and the lukewarm acquiescence of the US, it is not clear that he could have survived so long (seven months!) as a caretaker prime minister nor that he could have on his own fended off the challenges from other plausible candidates or put together a parliamentary majority.

The stunning victory of the militant Muslim fundamentalist Hamas Party in the Palestinian elections of January 2006 underlined the central contradictions in the Bush administration's policies toward the Middle East. Bush pushed for elections, confusing them with democracy, but seemed blind to the dangers of right-wing populism. As a result, Sunni fundamentalist parties, some with ties to violent cells, emerged as key players in Iraq, Egypt and Palestine.

Hamas's victory on January 26, 2006, created a profound ambivalence in Washington. In his press conference soon after the election, Bush said: "The people are demanding honest government. The people want services." Bush allowed then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to sideline the ruling Fatah Party of Yasser Arafat, to fire missiles at its police stations, and to reduce its leader to a besieged nonentity. Sharon ordered the serial assassinations of civilian Hamas leaders in Gaza, making them martyrs. Frustrated, the Palestinian public predictably swung to the far right, though opinion polling makes it clear that few who voted for Hamas shared their political and social program. Rather, they were weary of the Palestinian Authority and believed that Hamas would be more effective negotiating partners with the Israelis. As a Saudi political talk show host told the Associated Press, "They [Hamas] will be the Arab Sharon. They will be tough, but only a tough group can snatch concessions from Israel."⁶

In a mystifying self-contradiction, Bush trumpeted that "the Palestinians had an election yesterday, the results of which remind me about the power of democracy." If elections were really the same as democracy, and if Bush was so happy about the process, then we might have expected him to pledge to work with the results, which by his lights would be intrinsically good.

6 Donna Abu-Nasr, "Arabs jubilant at Hamas victory," Associated Press, January 26, 2006.

Instead, Bush was saying that even though elections are democracy and democracy is good and powerful, it produced unacceptable results in this case, and so the resulting Hamas government would lack the legitimacy necessary to allow the United States to deal with it or go forward in any peace process.

President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah had earlier been elected in a separate process. Bush said, "We'd like him to stay in power." Khaled Mashaal, the Hamas leader in exile in Syria, said that his party would be willing to work with Abbas as president, according to a party spokesman. But then when Bush was asked if the United States would end aid to the Palestinian Authority if a Hamas government was formed, he implied that it would, unless Hamas changed its platform, which opposes the existence of the state of Israel on the grounds that the territory belongs to the Palestinians. The charge that Hamas is inherently violent and therefore an unacceptable partner suffers from essentialism. From 1994 to 2004, Hamas's military wing launched many suicide attacks against Israelis, killing hundreds of people, most of them civilians. Despite Hamas' founding position that the Israeli state is illegitimate, however, violence is not foreordained. A Hamas leader, Mahmoud Zahar, told the Associated Press that his party would continue what he called its year-old "truce" if Israel did the same.

No truce would be allowed. Bush and the Israelis announced that they would refuse to deal with Hamas, and

they cut off aid to the Palestine Authority (which had a deleterious effect on institutions such as hospitals, to which the funding had been passed by the PA). Hamas members of the PA assembly met and elected Ismail Haniyeh prime minister, and he chose a cabinet. The Israelis began capturing Hamas representatives and cabinet members, whisking them away to Israeli prisons. By summer of 2007 the Bush administration had orchestrated a coup against the Hamas government in the West Bank by the secular Fatah faction led by PA President Mahmoud Abbas. A similar attempt to overthrow Hamas in Gaza failed. Mahmoud Abbas extra-constitutionally appointed a Fatah prime minister, Salam Fayyad, who was known as a competent administrator but who was not a product of popular sovereignty or of an even vaguely constitutional process.

In the aftermath of the failed coup, the Israelis slapped a Draconian blockade on Gaza, explicitly aimed at punishing civilian Gazans for having voted Hamas into power and for having declined to overthrow it. The blockade contributed to great misery in the Palestinian population of Gaza, many of whom still live in refugee camps, having fled there from what is now Israel during the ethnic cleansing campaigns of 1948. It did not, however, lead to the fall of the rump Hamas government. In the end, and despite a long-term successful cease-fire, the Olmert government launched a destructive war on Gaza in winter 2008-2009.

The deadline passed for further elections for the Palestine Authority as called for in its charter, so that both the caretaker presidency of Abbas and the Hamas statelet in Gaza receded further and further into illegitimacy. Palestine was not a prime candidate for successful transition to democracy. The GDP per capita is only about \$1400, less than Egypt. The conditions of occupation and (in Gaza) blockade make free movement and organization difficult. Palestinians suffered economic downward mobility in the twenty-first century and many even became food insecure (a majority became so in Gaza, from which the Israelis interdicted all exports from 2007 onwards). Unlike Afghanistan and Iraq, Palestine is ethnically relatively homogeneous (most Palestinians are Sunni Muslims and the Christian population is shrinking through emigration; but there is fairly good cooperation between Christians and Muslims). But the differences in political culture between the West Bank and Gaza have provoked firefights between Fatah and Hamas paramilitaries and function as ethnic divides do elsewhere. The Western-trained and equipped Palestine Authority security forces, backed by Fatah guerrillas, successfully intervened against Hamas in the West Bank, and it is those security forces more than popular sovereignty that explain Mahmoud Abbas's extraconstitutional tenure as president.

But the primary cause for the failure of the 2006 elections to produce a democratic regime lie with the

United State and Israel, which actively undermined and ultimately destroyed the elected government because Hamas was unacceptable to them. External intervention and neocolonialism need to be added to the reasons for which democracy fails if the Palestine Authority is to be explained.

The four cases of attempted democratic transition by force or pressure from the outside considered here, Egypt, Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, were chosen by Bush for short-term tactical reasons, not because they were good candidates for such an experiment based on their social indicators. All four are poverty-stricken, and poverty is negatively correlated with successful democratic transitions. Two of the four are multiethnic societies with severe ethnic grievances and a history of violence, which tells against democratic stability. Although Palestine is not similarly ethnically divided, being mostly Sunni Muslim, its secular-religious and party divide, between Hamas and Fateh, functions in a similar way. (Particular *hamulahs* or clans have thrown in with one or the other, especially given that they are geographically rooted in Gaza or the West Bank, so that there is even a proto-ethnic dimension to this political rivalry.) Egypt is fairly homogeneous ethnically, being largely Sunni Muslim but with a Coptic Christian minority of about 6 percent. Two of the four depend heavily on a single high-priced primary commodity, oil in the case of Iraq and poppies in that of Afghanistan, which is correlated with

high rates of social and political violence and political instability. Palestine's main analogue to such an income is its dependence on government and NGO aid, over which Hamas and Fatah have struggled, so that this sort of strategic rent has caused violence in the same way that primary commodity production might. Egypt is, again, an outlier in this regard, having multiple sources of income, including agriculture and tourism, and a growing light industry and services sector. In Egypt, the failure of democratic transition in the Bush era rested most heavily on the unity of the narrow elite, the cohesion of the military and security officers and officials, and the inability of Kefaya and Ghad to mobilize sufficient numbers of people in the streets effectively to challenge the regime. In the Palestine Authority as well, the coup against the Hamas democratization of electoral politics was made by the PA security forces and Fatah guerrillas. In Afghanistan, Karzai's power grab depended at least in part on the Afghanistan National Army's backing for him, as well as his knowledge that the US and NATO were fighting the insurgents for him and would support him. Despite the rise of a soft authoritarianism in the form of Nuri al-Maliki's regime in Iraq, the new Iraqi military was less salient in preserving the prime minister's power than in the other three cases. In Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine there are multiple warring armed guerrilla groups, tribal gangs and criminal cartels not under central government control, attesting to state failure.

Ironically, Egypt, the least democratic of the four, is also the most secure and the least like a failed state.

We may conclude that muscular Wilsonianism failed in the Middle East in part because the candidates chosen by Bush for this exercise were poor candidates. If his, and his advisers', analogy was to the post-Soviet transformations in Eastern Europe, he chose the countries that looked more like Yugoslavia than like Poland. In addition, foreign military occupation was a feature of three of the cases, and in each of the three it provoked guerrilla opposition and suicide bombings of a destabilizing sort (Hamas in Palestine, the Islamic State of Iraq in Iraq, the Taliban and kindred groups in Afghanistan). In Afghanistan the guerrilla opposition preceded the occupation, but it was quiescent for some time after the 2001 war, and it was arguably the US and NATO large military footprint that spurred it to large-scale insurgency again in the second half of the zeroes. Even in Egypt, the military benefited from 30 years of lucrative strategic rent doled out by the US, as a means of supporting American interests in the eastern Mediterranean, so the continued strength of the Egyptian army is in part a by-product of neo-imperialism. In an important dialectic in the other three cases, the antioccupation guerrilla movements impelled the foreigners to train and equip growing and increasingly effective military and security forces in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, and in each case these forces ultimately played relatively

antidemocratic roles. Muscular Wilsonianism fails, where the occupation regime lacks firm control over the occupied society or is unable to coopt significant portions of the public, precisely because the imperial powers then decide they need praetorian allies more than they need genuine democracy.

Not only did Bush's democratization largely fail, it left a series of messes behind for the Obama administration. The Obama team increasingly put an emphasis on enlarging and training the Afghan security forces, over to which it intends to hand the country as soon as possible, and talk of democratization in Kabul has rather declined. Obama seems determined to withdraw militarily, at least in the main, from Iraq, and his administration appears sanguine about a soft coup by al-Maliki, even one supported by Iran. The administration initially ceased pressuring the Mubarak regime to open up, in accordance with its Realist predilections. Obama during his first year and a half invested significant political capital in moving toward a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, but was beholden in that process to the right wing government of Binyamin Netanyahu, as well as to Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah, which made the 2007 coup and are now ruling the West Bank extra-constitutionally. Obama could have pushed for new PA elections when they were due, in January of 2010, but did not. Even the municipal elections scheduled for summer of 2010, which some in Fatah hoped might presage the declaration of a Palestinian

state in 2011, were mysteriously postponed. Obama's keynote has been realism and laying the foundation for American disentanglement from the Middle East, even if in two cases (Afghanistan and Palestine) intensified US efforts, whether military or diplomatic, were felt necessary to lay the foundation for that disengagement.

In one of foreign policy's great ironies, the democratization that the Bush administration made the centerpiece of its Middle East policy failed miserably in 2001-2009, whereas the cautious, Realist Obama administration suddenly found itself face to face with massive instability and popular movements for democracy throughout the region in spring of 2011. There is no obvious connection between the Arab Spring and the Bush projects. Iraq was cited by no activists as a model, and, indeed, twitter feeds from Tahrir Square in Cairo during the uprising against Mubarak often urged that the mistakes made in Iraq be avoided. It was if anything a negative example. The roots of these movements must be sought elsewhere than in Washington think tanks. What does explain this outbreak of democracy?

Arab politics had been stuck in a vast logjam for the past thirty years, from which its crowds are now attempting to blast it loose. The protesters put their fingers on the phenomenon of the vampire state and concluded that before anything important could change, they had to put a stake through its heart.

Under European colonialism the Middle East had a few decades of classic liberal rule in the first half of the twentieth century. Egypt, Iraq and Iran had elected parliaments, prime ministers and popular parties. However, liberal rule was eventually discredited insofar as it proved to be largely a game played by big landlords overly open to the influence and bribery of grasping Western powers. From about the 1950s, the modern one-party states of the Middle East justified themselves through the struggle for independence from those Western colonial empires and the corrupt parliamentary regimes. They undertook land reform, developed big public sectors and promoted state-led industrialization. In recent decades, however, each ruling party, backed by a nationalist officer corps, increasingly became little more than an appendage of the president for life and his extended clan. The massive networks of informers and secret police worked for the interests of the central executive.

Why did the Egyptian state, among others, lose its legitimacy? Max Weber distinguished between power and authority. Power flows from the barrel of a gun, and the Egyptian state still has plenty of those. But Weber defines authority as the likelihood that a command will be obeyed. Leaders who have authority do not have to shoot people. The Mubarak regime had to shoot hundreds, and wound more, in a vain attempt to remain in power. Literally hundreds of thousands of people ignored Mubarak's

command that they observe curfews and stay home. He lost his authority.

Authority is rooted in legitimacy. Leaders are acknowledged because the people agree that there is some legitimate basis for their authority and power. In democratic countries, that legitimacy comes from the ballot box. In Egypt, it derived 1952-1970 from the leading role of the Egyptian military and security forces in freeing Egypt from Western hegemony. That struggle included grappling with Britain to gain control over the Suez Canal (originally built by the Egyptian government and opened in 1869, but bought for a song by the British in 1875 when sharp Western banking practices brought the indebted Egyptian government to the brink of bankruptcy). It also involved fending off aggressive Israeli attempts to occupy the Sinai Peninsula and to assert Israeli interests in the Suez Canal. Revolutionary Arab nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser (d. 1970) conducted extensive land reform, breaking up the huge Central America-style haciendas and creating a rural middle class. Leonard Binder argued in the late 1960s that that rural middle class was the backbone of the regime. Abdul Nasser's state-led industrialization also created a new class of urban contractors who benefited from the building works commissioned by the government.

From 1970, Anwar El Sadat took Egypt in a new direction, opening up the economy and openly siding with the new multimillionaire contracting class.

It in turn was eager for European and American investment. Tired of the fruitless Arab-Israeli wars, the Egyptian public was largely supportive of Sadat's 1978 peace deal with Israel, which ended the cycle of wars with that country and opened the way for the building up of the Egyptian tourist industry and Western investment in it, as well as American and European aid. Egypt was moving to the Right.

Politically, after the Camp David accords, Egypt largely sat out the big struggles in the Mideast, and made what has widely been called a separate peace. While the move may not have been initially unpopular, over time it stoked popular rage. Egypt's cooperation in the Israeli blockade of Gaza and its general quiet alliance with the US and Israel angered most young people politically, even as they racked up economic frustrations. Cairo's behind the scenes help to the US, with Iraq and with torturing suspected al-Qaeda operatives, were well known. Very little is more distasteful to Egyptians than the Iraq War and torture. The Egyptian state went from being broadly based in the 1950s and 1960s to having been captured by a small elite. It went from being a symbol of the striving for dignity and independence after decades of British dominance to being seen as a lap dog of the West.

On the economic front, whereas Abdel Nasser's socialist policies had led to a doubling of the average real wage in Egypt 1960-1970, from 1970 to 2000 there was

no real development in the country. Part of the problem was demographic. If the population grows 3 percent a year and the economy grows 3 percent a year, the per capita increase is zero. Since about 1850, Egypt and most other Middle Eastern countries have been having a (mysterious) population boom. The ever-increasing population also increasingly crowded into the cities, which typically offer high wages than rural work does, even in the marginal economy (e.g. selling matches). Nearly half the country now lives in cities, and even many villages have become 'suburbs' of vast metropolises.

The rural middle class, while still important, is no longer such a weighty support for the regime. A successful government would need to have the ever-increasing numbers of city people on its side. But there, the Neo-liberal policies pressed on Hosni Mubarak by the US since 1981 were unhelpful. Samer Soliman has argued that the Egyptian state of the 1980s, Mubarak's first decade, was oriented toward providing salaries and perquisites to the large class of government employees and those dependent on government expenditures. From the 1990s forward, the state suffered substantial declines in external rents that limited its ability to satisfy this salaried class. Soliman does not deal with the demographic issue, but rapid growth made satisfying the middle and working classes more difficult for the government. Egyptian cities suffer from high unemployment and relatively high inflation. The urban sector has thrown up

a few multimillionaires, but many laborers fell left behind. The enormous number of high school and college graduates produced by the system can seldom find employment suited to their skills, and many cannot get jobs at all. Urban Egypt has rich and poor but only a small “middle class.” The state carefully tries to control labor unions, who could seldom act independently.

The state was thus increasingly seen to be a state for the few. Its old base in the rural middle classes was rapidly declining as young people moved to the cities. It was doing little for the urban working and middle classes. An ostentatious state business class emerged, deeply dependent on government contracts and state good will, and meeting in the fancy tourist hotels. But the masses of high school and college graduates reduced to driving taxis or selling rugs (if they could even get those gigs) were not benefiting from the on-paper growth rates of the past decade.

The failure of the regime to connect with the rapidly growing new urban working and middle classes, and its inability to provide jobs to the masses of college graduates it was creating, set the stage for last week’s events. Educated, white collar people need a rule of law as the framework for their economic activities, and Mubarak’s arbitrary rule is seen as a drag here. While the economy has been growing 5 and 6 percent in the past decade, what government impetus there was to this development remained relatively hidden—unlike its role in the land

reform of the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the income gained from increased trade largely went to a small class of investors. For instance, from 1991 the government sold 150 of 314 state factories it put on the block, but the benefit of the sales went to a narrow sliver of people.

The world economy's setback in 2008-2009 had a direct and horrible effect on Egyptians living on the edge. Many of the poor got hungrier. Then the downturn in petroleum prices and revenues caused many Egyptian guest workers to lose their economic cushion. They either could no longer send their accustomed remittances, or they had to come back in humiliation.

The Nasserist state, for all its flaws, gained legitimacy because it was seen as a state for the mass of Egyptians, whether abroad or domestically. The present regime is widely seen in Egypt as a state for the others—for the US, Israel, France and the UK—and as a state for the few- the Neoliberal nouveau riche. Islam plays no role in this analysis because it is not an independent variable. Muslim movements have served to protest the withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities, and to provide services. But they are a symptom, not the cause.

These governments took steps in recent decades toward neoliberal policies of privatization and a smaller public sector under pressure from Washington and allied institutions—and the process was often corrupt. The ruling families used their prior knowledge of important economic policy initiatives to engage in a kind of insider trading, advantaging their relatives and buddies.

The wife of Tunisian dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, the notorious former hairdresser Leila Ben Ali, placed her relatives in key business positions enabled by insider government knowledge and licenses that allowed them to dominate the country. The US Embassy in Tunis estimated in 2006 that half the major entrepreneurs in the country were related by blood or marriage to the president. In Egypt, Ahmed Ezz, for example, benefited from his high position in the ruling National Democratic Party and his friendship with Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal. Ezz has been formally charged with usurping control of a government-owned steel concern and of rerouting its products to his own, privately owned Ezz Steel company. In the past decade, Ezz went from controlling 35 percent of the Egyptian steel market to over 60 percent, raising a chorus of accusations of monopoly practices. Since the Mubaraks rigged the elections so that the NDP always won, and the party officials favored by the president prospered, Egypt was ruled by a closed elite.

The policies of these one-party states created widespread anxiety among workers, the unemployed and even entrepreneurs outside the charmed circle, seeming to create an insuperable obstacle to the advancement of the ordinary person. Everyone could be taken advantage of or even expropriated at will by corrupt state elites, who had the backing of the secret police. Workers' strikes were crushed by security police. The presidents even began putting on regal airs and grooming

their sons as successors, ensuring that the family cartels and cronyism would continue into the next generation. The one-party states also pursued distorted development goals. Among their few achievements was the reduction of infant mortality. They put tremendous sums into universities and higher education but inexplicably neglected K-12 education for the rural and urban poor. The result was large numbers of young villagers, slum dwellers and workers with limited opportunities for advancement, and phalanxes of unemployed college graduates.

Fear of the perpetuation of a closed economic and power elite drove Tunisians and Egyptians to focus on driving the Ben Alis and Mubaraks from power. The narrowness of the dominant cliques had disgusted even the regular army officer corps, who in any case were close to the people because they commanded conscript armies. When the crowds came out so determinedly, they declared their neutrality.

Other regional mafia states have scrambled to mollify their publics. Ali Abdullah Saleh, the strongman who has ruled Yemen since 1978, announced that he would not run for yet another term in 2013, and that no attempt would be made to install his son after him. He was trying to deflect the severe criticisms of his nepotism (his half-brother is head of the air force, and nephews are highly placed in the security apparatus). These pledges were code for ending the dominance of the state and economy by relatives and friends of Saleh. The nepotism and

corruption of the ruling clique in Yemen is all the more explosive because the country is already deeply divided. The tribal north has a different history from the south, which had a lively worker movement and even, briefly, a communist government before Saleh forcibly unified the two in 1990. Religious and tribal rebellions, as with the Zaydi Shiite Houthis in the north and a radical Islamist tendency in the rural south, make Yemen anything but stable. The country's declining petroleum revenues and its increasing water crisis make the economic pie even smaller, increasing public disgust with the Saleh cartel. Having the government and the economy in the hands of an unrepresentative and greedy clique is a recipe for further unrest.

Likewise, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki said he would not seek another term; his opponents have charged him with operating secret torture cells and a private army, and aspiring to become another corrupt strongman. Since Iraq's petroleum riches are in government hands, it would be easy for a few key cabinet members to use them for sectional and even private purposes, a source of constant anxiety among Iraq's suffering populace, which lacks electricity and even, often, potable water.

Algeria's corrupt state petroleum elite, represented by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, is also being targeted by street crowds. The country's ruling generals had allowed a Muslim fundamentalist party, the Islamic Salvation Front, to run in the 1991 parliamentary elections, on the theory

that it would not win. When the fundamentalists took a two-thirds majority, the generals canceled the runoff and threw the country into a vicious civil war between secular urban elites and lower-middle-class or rural fundamentalists that took an estimated 150,000 lives. Because the generals won the civil war, and the army stands behind the regime, it is harder for the urban crowds to gain traction. In Tunisia and Egypt, there was no similar history of rancor between people and army, and no fear on the part of the officer corps that they would be tried and executed if the government was overthrown. In addition, the Algerian petroleum state, like the Gulf oil monarchies, has the resources to bribe much of the public into quiescence or to deploy well-paid and loyal security forces when the bribe does not work (as seems to be the case in Bahrain, where the Sunni monarchy has chosen violent repression of the restive Shiite majority).

In Egypt and Tunisia, once the ruling families were gone, the interim governments promptly froze the accounts of regime cronies and in many instances initiated legal proceedings against them. Seeing the writing on the wall, the ambitious resigned en masse from the now notorious former ruling party; the RCD in Tunisia was dissolved altogether.

Among the groups that made the revolutions demanding more democracy in Tunisia and Egypt (where these demands may have some hope of being met) were workers, women and youth. All the talk about the role of Facebook

and Twitter and other new media in enabling the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Algeria has took the focus off a major player in these dramatic events: the labor movement. While university-educated new middle classes have played a key role in organizing the protests and mobilizing youths, they are typically tightly connected with labor syndicates and blue collar workers, whether urban or rural. Many of the key demands of the movement have to do with pay equity and living conditions for the working poor and the unemployed. Ignoring this central element in the revolts leads many U.S. observers to misunderstand their significance and to obsess about Muslim fundamentalism. In the midst of the uproar at Cairo's downtown Tahrir ("Liberation") Square, a new umbrella labor organization was formed, the Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions, and welcomed by the United States' AFL-CIO. It united white collar and blue collar workers on the need for reform of the Egyptian state, and seeks to supplant the state-controlled Federation of Trade Unions. Among the actions supporting the crowds were effective labor strikes that closed factories and offices, freeing workers to demonstrate.

The unrest in Egypt in some ways can be traced to the attempt of workers at the state-run textile factories of al-Mahalla al-Kubra just outside Cairo to launch a major strike on April 6, 2008. The idea spread elsewhere in the country, promoted by computer-literate working class youths and their supporters among middle-class

college students. A Facebook page set up to promote the strike attracted tens of thousands of followers. The authoritarian state mobilized to break the strike, infiltrating the factories with plainclothes security men, lining streets in downtown Cairo and elsewhere with phalanxes of riot police, and warning strikers and their supporters of three years in prison for participating. The fundamentalist party, the Muslim Brotherhood, which skews to the right on social issues, declined to support the movement, and lost credibility with many of the youths as a result.

Although the regime had some success in forestalling a successful outcome that time, an “April 6 Committee” of youths and labor activists was formed and continued to plan and agitate. They were among the major forces calling for the big demonstration on Jan. 25 at Tahrir Square that brought down the Egyptian Cabinet and placed a question mark over the government’s future. There have been more than 3,000 labor actions since 2004 in Egypt, where manufacturing now accounts for about a quarter of the economy. Recent years have given workers reason to be unhappy. The 2008-09 banking crisis in the West hurt North Africa and the Middle East by slowing trade and tourism. Some 20 percent of Egyptians already lived below the poverty line, and another fifth lived just above that line and were vulnerable to going under. Growth in the gross domestic product fell from over 7 percent in 2007-08 to only 4 percent in 2008-09. Galloping inflation rates as high as 25 percent hurt workers. The fall in petroleum prices accompanying the economic

downturn meant that the 3 million Egyptian workers abroad, many in oil states, either had to come home in humiliation or at the very least could not send back home as much money as before.

Unemployment rose to about 25 percent for ages 15-25 in the last quarter of 2008, and the ability of the economy to create jobs was much weakened. The Egyptian stock market lost about half its value in 2008 alone, making it one of the worst affected by the crisis, along with Dubai and the Russian Federation.

Declining living standards and the labor movement that inspired the mass protests in Egypt also were at the core of the Tunisian Revolution. That revolt was sparked by a young vegetable seller setting himself on fire when his permit was withdrawn by the government. Because he was rumored to be educated, the story of Mohamad Bouazizi's self-immolation enraged Tunisians living on the edge throughout the country.

In Tunisia, unemployment was estimated at 13 percent overall in 2009, but at more like 22 percent for university graduates, and nearly a third of all young people ages 15-29 were without jobs. After reaching 6 percent a year in 2007, economic growth was shaved to 3 percent once the crisis hit. Many families depended on remittances from the 650,000 Tunisian workers who had emigrated, often to Western Europe, where the economy crashed. The sums they sent back to households in Tunisia are estimated to have fallen 10 percent. Tourism, investment and exports of manufacturers were all also

hurt. Although the region was as badly affected as some others, many families were already living on the edge, and any downturn pushed them off it.

In January, once the popular protests spread from rural towns to the capital, the major union, the UGTT, swung around and supported the movement, probably, some observers have argued, as a result of the pressure that union officials felt from the rank and file. Although the UGTT initially accepted Cabinet posts in the interim government after the dictator Ben Ali fled in mid-January, they quickly reversed themselves when it became clear that members of Ben Ali's party would remain at the helm. This old, established union, once somewhat co-opted by the regime, has become part of the movement for a new and more equitable Tunisia. This labor movement has helped change the government in Tunisia, and it reinspired the repressed Egyptian April 6 labor movement, which called the Jan. 25 mass demonstrations in emulation of the Tunisian workers and students.

The technique used to open up politics in the Arab Spring in a way that eluded George W. Bush has been the flashmob, the cascade, and blackmailing the elite. Youth movements and office and factory workers used social media such as Facebook and Twitter to call for demonstrations at particular times and places, creating enormous flashmobs or spontaneous gatherings of physical crowds impelled by a spontaneous internet call to assemble. The flashmobs technique eluded many procedures of the security police because of their unpredictability

and dependence on non-transparent networks. In addition, the size of the resultant crowds was enormous and unpredictable. The more people in the street, the less likely it was that any particular person would be in danger. And, a tipping point was reached that produced a cascade. That is, 30,000 people in the street might not inspire the masses to join, but 40,000 might. Previous demonstrations never reached the tipping point and so never produced a cascade. When the movement showed itself able to consistently put tens and even hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, and in many cities around the country, it was able to paralyze the economy and so threaten elite interests. The crowds gave the elite a choice between having the army fire on them or pushing out the narrow mafia-like families and networks of cronies that dominated the upper echelons of the power structure. In Tunisia, where the army was small and poorly equipped, and in Egypt, where the vast majority of troops were conscripts in for three years, using the military against the crowds was politically undesirable. The US also did have some influence with the Egyptian officer corps and appears to have pressured it to avoid a bloodbath. In those two countries, then the crowds more or less provoked a coup by other members of the elite against the presidents for life and their families and associates. They demanded a transition to liberal, parliamentary democracy in the aftermath. In Libya, Bahrain and Syria, as I write in late April, 2011, the elite and the military in the capital proved cohesive enough to attempt

to repress the protesters. Yemen looks as though it may follow the pattern of Tunisia and Egypt. Morocco saw smaller protests but its elites are nevertheless speaking of a move toward constitutional monarchy. So far only minor reforms are envisioned in Algeria and Jordan. The two cases, Bush's projects and the Arab Spring, are not directly comparable as yet since the latter has been about initiating rather than successfully accomplishing a democratic transition. Differences of income or the impact of commodity rent and of ethnic divisions have not been central to explaining why the transition begins, but may come into play over time where one is attempted.

Many among the demonstrators in the Arab world, whether union organizers, villagers or college graduates, seem to believe that once the lead log in the logjam is removed—i.e. once the narrow, mafia-like elites at the top are removed—the economy will return to normal and opportunities for advancement will open up to all. They have put their hopes in free and fair parliamentary elections, so that the Middle East may be swinging back to a new liberal period, formally resembling that of the 1930s and '40s. If these aspirations for open politics and economic opportunity are blocked again, as they were by the hacienda owners and Western proconsuls of the mid-twentieth century, the Arab masses may turn to more desperate, and dangerous, alternatives.