

Whither the Political and Social Movement in Arab Countries

Can we Expect a New Arab Renaissance?

Writing in the Heat of the Moment

As I write these lines in mid-March 2011, both Tunisia and Egypt continue to change their bearings as they seek to agree and approve promising initiatives aiming to establish new, democratic states. At the same time, it appears that Libya has embarked on a journey of armed military conflict with the forces of the regime confronting opposition forces. Indeed, the conflict has taken on an international dimension following adoption of the UN Security Council resolution and the launch of international military operations – despite the fact that the direction in which this struggle is heading is still very unclear. Matters are also becoming complicated in Yemen, as domestic tensions continue to escalate and the specter of violence, tribal division and internal conflict looms over the country. Meanwhile the joint armed forces of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) member states have intervened in Bahrain, as permitted under the GCC agreement, and a state of emergency has been declared. It would appear that relations between the regime and opposition forces – as well as relations between parties which support the regime and parties belonging to the opposition – have reached a critical stage. And finally, protest movements have also started in more than one city in Syria.

Conditions are changing at such speed that it is impossible to predict what the situation in the countries referred to above – or indeed in other, neighboring countries – will be by the time this article is published. This is one of the difficulties encountered by writers during times of major upheaval, and it transforms all attempts at prediction and deduction into a kind of gamble – a gamble which must ultimately be taken, nevertheless.

For this reason, rather than focusing on the unfolding of events, this article will instead attempt to propose a number of elements for an analytical framework based on a review of the preceding phases in history, and to predict what the future outcome of this process of

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transformation may be. We start from the conviction that the current political movement – which is usually referred to as the young people's revolution and is taking place in more than one country – represents the starting point for a more profound process of transformation which will, in the end, be subject to a sociological and historical analysis stretching over long periods of time. This we shall attempt to explain by making certain assumptions in our exegesis.



Adib Nehme

Adib Nehme is the Regional Advisor on the Millennium Development Goals at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) based in Beirut. Previously he was UNDP's regional advisor on poverty and project manager at the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs. He is a registered lawyer and holds degrees in sociology and philosophy. He is board member of several development organizations and has published extensively on human development, social policy, poverty, disability, gender, and youth and adolescents.

Surprise

It is reasonable to say that the latest political and social movement in the Arab countries – starting in Tunisia and Egypt – has taken almost everybody by surprise, including the young people who initiated the uprisings and may not have expected events to proceed as swiftly and dramatically as they actually did in these two countries. In the first instance, the nations in the North were the most surprised, especially the European countries on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean. But the political and civil institutions in the countries affected by these revolutions were just as surprised – in particular members of the opposition parties.

There is a common factor underlying this similarity between the attitudes of mind of the European countries on the one hand and the political and civil institutions on the other, because both groups had, for different reasons, ruled out any possibility of political change in the Arab countries for the foreseeable future. Everybody seemed to accept the existing *status quo* – indeed, some even contributed to it. Consequently the agendas of most of the institutionalized national and international powers – that is, the traditional political opposition movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the development sector – remained firmly limited

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to demands, interventions and projects which were not characterized by any dimension of radical change. In particular, they disregarded any immediately political dimension with a direct bearing on democracy and human rights – in the fullest sense of the term – as well as any engagement with movements calling for change

at street level. They also neglected to analyze or even examine the question of the state and its particular characteristics, its pivotal role in creating and perpetuating tyrannical structures, and its systematic destruction of any prospects for democratic change. If they had engaged with these issues, they would have been obliged to confront the question of how to build a state and society governed by the principles of citizenship and civic responsibility (in the modern sense of these terms).

Revolution without Intermediary

If we wished to apply a scientific, objective description to these revolutions, we would say they represent uprisings of civil society against statist regimes, and in this sense show certain significant similarities with the uprisings that led to the collapse of the Soviet system some two decades previously. Civil society started these uprisings directly, bypassing the traditional intermediaries embodied in existing institutions. This was because decades of extreme oppression by the state, coupled with the *de jure* and *de facto* criminalization of any political or promotional activities by elements of civil society – especially in respect of political and human rights – had imposed severe restrictions on the capacity of political parties and NGOs to take any meaningful action by confining the latter within the narrowest possible boundaries and thereby limiting their effectiveness. The longer this state of affairs continued, the less effectual was the impact of these institutions.

Political parties – by which we mean primarily opposition parties involved in opposing the ruling regime – have experienced a general erosion of their civil engagement. They were largely tamed into becoming either part of the system or mere decorative facades. Most of the other civic organizations which took a developmental approach based on human rights effectively became captive to the exigencies of donor parties or toothless international institutions with agendas that had little to do with dismantling the steady encroachment of systemic rigidity and formal

political stagnation. So it was natural that once the forms of institutional expression became incapable of generating a civic pro-democracy movement driven by those institutions, civil society expressed itself without intermediary – that is to say, expressed itself directly as a broad mass movement of the people, transcending not only the modes of action available to NGOs, but also those of political parties which were past their prime and no longer able to inspire loyalty or show leadership. Information and communication technology provided the practical basis for creating and consolidating networks, providing not only new and highly effective methods for leading and directing, but also for organizing and uniting political movements and popular gatherings.

The Secular Model Succeeds where Other Models Failed

For a long time, analysts and activists believed that secular value systems did not possess the same ability to mobilize people as religious or nationalist ideologies. Consequently attempts by civil activists to address very large groups of people were very timid and ineffectual, and in the Arab world in particular, these activists did not attempt to transform themselves from active, well-organized cadres with good organizational and promotional skills and abilities into a social movement with genuine continuity, capable of proposing radical slogans. What happened in Tunisia and Egypt demonstrated that institutionalized civil society committed a very serious error by failing to raise and transform itself from the status of organizations and networks into a genuine political movement.

Furthermore, previous attempts had in fact been made to form wide-ranging social movements, both at national and pan-Arab level. In past decades and in more recent years, such attempts had sometimes been made under the nationalist banner – nationalist in the sense of expressing solidarity with the Palestinians and their sufferings (most recently on the occasion of the war in Gaza in 2008) – and sometimes under the banner

of Islam, which represents a strong continuity of awareness, firmly anchored in the public psyche both in individual Arab countries and across the Arab world as a whole. Such attempts had access to significant resources and funding, starting with huge media interest, passing through a state of legitimate anger and a sense that national and personal dignity was being affronted by tyranny and oppression, to rage at external and domestic aggression.

Despite this, neither the nationalist nor the religious ideologies succeeded in uniting all classes of society within individual countries. Neither did they succeed in generating a cross-border desire for change comparable to the infectious mood which spread from Tunisia and Egypt to various other Arab countries, and which was further intensified by adapting the slogan “The people want the downfall of the regime” into slogans applicable to all political movements in all the countries concerned. Where the religious and nationalist messages had failed, the democratic secular movement succeeded in communicating a message

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which transcended many of the divisions and differences between opinions and tendencies within particular countries. This message also successfully evolved into a collective message shared by countries in widely differing circumstances such as Yemen, the Kingdom of Morocco and all the other Arab countries.

For the Arab peoples, this made the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions appear fully rounded and capable of supporting rebellion for the sake of democracy in the broadest

sense, i.e. embracing all the various meanings and concepts associated with democracy and, far from neglecting or rejecting national or nationalist aspects, instead incorporating them into this larger framework. Democracy is capable of this kind of all-embracing initiative, whereas by their very nature the nationalist

If we focus on the socio-economic axis, we identify ourselves, as Arabs, as belonging to the South, while Europe, North America and other industrially advanced nations are identified as belonging to the North. But if instead we focus on the axis of cultural identity, we tend to define ourselves as belonging to the East, whereas the industrialized nations belong to the West.

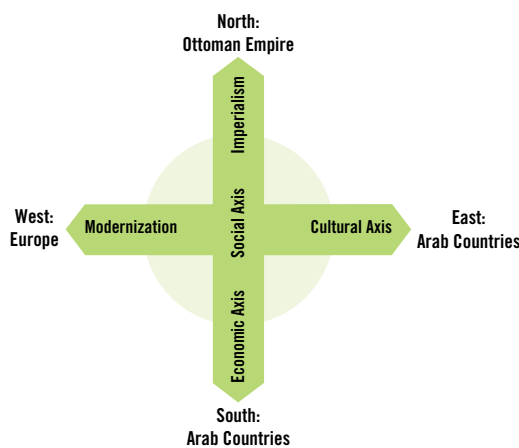
and religious messages excluded both the abstract idea and practical mechanisms of a secular state, and consequently failed to unite the various currents, tendencies and groups in the population as a whole, or across the social classes. Quite simply, those promoting specific religious or nationalist ideologies, which by their nature represent the ideologies of specific social or political groups, were unable to persuade all classes of society to adopt these ideologies. The success of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions – and the new factor in the revolutionary equation – lies in the fact that the ideas and demands of the social groups which initially launched the diverse political movements in Tunisia and Egypt were transformed into a social project which united all of society behind it and in support of it. The secret behind the success of these revolutions is that they embodied a social project representing almost the whole of society.

The question as to whether the revolutions will encounter difficulties in the future – and it

is highly likely that they will indeed encounter difficulties as they run their course – will be determined primarily by the extent to which this social cohesion erodes and breaks down into multiple feuding tendencies, each focusing on its own political message and abandoning the idea of democracy, along with the concept of taking turns in power and the ideal of building a truly civic state in the modern sense of the term.

Returning to the Project for an Arab Renaissance

In the current ideological and informational climate of the media, more than one duality exists in the various ways we define ourselves in reference to others. If we focus on the socio-economic axis, i.e. on the relationship between domination and subordination, we identify ourselves, as Arabs, as belonging to the South, while Europe, North America and other industrially advanced nations are identified as belonging to the North. But if instead we focus on the axis of cultural identity, we tend to define ourselves as belonging to the East, whereas the industrialized nations belong to the West. In the case of fundamentalist and reductionist religious ideologies, this latter duality is transformed into a religious duality consisting of the Muslims (ourselves) versus the rest (i.e. the Christians in the West and the Jews living in Israel). This religious duality represents a specific, more limited instance of the cultural duality pertaining between East and West, and we shall not



**First Formative Phase: Arab Renaissance 1:
End of 19th Century to Early 20th Century**

discuss it in this article, simply because it is already incorporated – in a general sense – into the broader cultural duality obtaining between East and West.

At present, no real distinction is drawn between North and West when national identities are defined, simply because both terms imply the same countries (i.e. Europe, America and the advanced industrial nations). But this has not always been the case.

If we examine the major historical phases, the Arab region passed through two formative phases of the greatest importance (and is currently, in our opinion, passing through a third such phase). The first phase was the phase of Arab Renaissance, extending from the end of the nineteenth century into the early part of the twentieth, and ending more or less concomitantly with the end of the First World War. Prior to this phase, the Arab world consisted of various societies and regions, most of which came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The empire justified its existence on the grounds that it was a continuation of the Islamic Caliphate. At that time the various Arab countries had not yet formed into nation states as understood in the modern definition of the term. Thus if we were describing the situation in terms of the dualities mentioned previously, i.e. based on the concept of domination and subjugation, the Ottoman Empire would represent the North (the dominant colonists) whereas the various Arab societies would represent the South (the subjugated indigenous peoples). Because both colonists and colonized shared the same religion, the Arab peoples – in the words of the Arab liberation movement at the time – identified themselves as Arabs, that is to say, they identified themselves as having national identities that transcended and united their various religious and tribal affiliations and established the concept of Arab nationalism in the modern sense of the term. This was the only way they could gain independence from the Ottoman Empire and liberate themselves from its colonialist domination, given that both sides had a single religion in common.

On the other hand, our European neighbors with their modern nation states were distinguished by their cultural differences, and by the fact that they lived in modern states built on institutional systems – they were modern Westerners as opposed to traditional Orientals. At that time the relationship between the Arabs and the Europeans was, for the most part and in a general sense, not the relationship of Imperialists to subject peoples, thus it was not a vertical (top-down) relationship. Rather it was a relationship displaying varying degrees of cultural, institutional and organizational development. Consequently the leaders of the Arab Renaissance at the time regarded Europe as an attractive model – indeed, they regarded the European system, and especially the systems underlying the modern nation state, as an advanced model compared to the outdated, decaying model of the Ottoman Empire. Thus up to the beginning of the twentieth century, the Arab Renaissance movement was built upon integrative elements, starting with the concept of pan-Arab identity as a desirable alternative to religious or tribal identity. This movement considered the model of European liberal democracy used to build a nation state – in particular the separation of powers, the concept of taking turns in power, as well as modern institutional and legislative frameworks – as the most appropriate model for Arab countries striving to liberate themselves from Ottoman rule. In addition, the European model boasted attractive, modern cultural concepts such as universal access to education, the rejection of habits and traditions incompatible with the modern era, the liberation of women, religious reform and other similar elements. At this stage the term “North” referred to the Ottoman Empire and not to the European West.

The Second Phase: Building Nations after Independence

The end of the First World War did not result in the independence of Arab societies, or in the creation of one or more independent nation states. Instead, Ottoman Imperialism was

replaced by other forms of Imperialism, this time as practiced by the European nations. This continued throughout the period between the

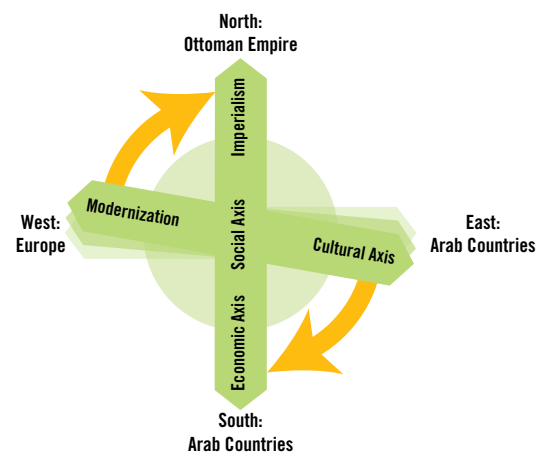
By portraying Western liberalism as an Imperialist project which should be resisted, both nationalist and socialist messages also succeeded in suffocating any attempts at religious reform and the modernization of Arab societies.

First and Second World Wars, and in the case of certain countries which only belatedly won “independence”, continued for about twenty years after the end of the Second World War. During this transitional phase certain parts of the State of Israel were established, then officially ratified in 1947 by a UN Resolution.

This phase laid the foundations for the second formative phase in the evolution of the Arab world, ultimately resulting in national independence and the formation of independent nation states. Arab nation states started to take shape at the end of the Second World War, and this formative period continued through to the 1960s in a series of political movements, rebellions and international agreements, as well as a number of military coups.

Broadly speaking, this second phase developed in more or less the same way in each of the Arab countries, which shared certain political and cultural values in spite of their historical differences and differing models of government. Generally speaking, however, this phase was characterized by a gradual departure from some of the elements featured in the earlier renaissance, as follows:

- **Decline of the liberal political approach** and the concept of legitimacy conferred by the principle of fairness, the rule of law and a political system based on the division of powers. This was suppressed in favor of revolutionary styles of populist legitimacy based on messages of national liberation, including opposition to Israel and neo-Imperialism, as well as power blocs founded on a mixture of religious and tribal law.
- **Primacy of the state** in determining how social and economic growth and development should take place.
- **Decline in the importance of cultural and social dimensions**, including issues associated with social traditions, the liberation of women and other elements which were regarded as more important during the first Arab Renaissance. In the early stages, these elements were not deliberately treated in a negative or contemptuous way; they were simply neglected because they effectively existed apart, thus needed continuity, management, protection and support. The dominant attitude at this time regarded the policy of liberation as a mixture of nationalist and socialist ideologies, thus considered it to be sufficient for the purposes of overcoming existing divisions and discrimination by subsuming all elements in a greater struggle confronting major issues. The aim was to focus firmly on economic independence once political independence had been achieved, thereby building up a strong state apparatus



Transitional Phase: End of WWI to Independence

capable of confronting Israel and neo-Imperialist ambitions. In countries where the cultural and political structure of the regime was traditional, tribal or religious, modernisation had never really appeared on the agenda in the first place.

- **Decline in the importance of religious reform.** Indeed, the voices of the leading religious reformers fell silent, even though they had played a decisive part in the first Renaissance by expressing strong support for the model of a modern democratic state. Once again, this decline did not express itself in the form of conspicuous hostility towards this movement, but arose rather from a naive belief that the national resurgence would in itself be sufficient to transcend or reformulate religious attitudes. As far as the political aspect was concerned, the revolutionary political and populist ideologies did not regard Western liberalism or the sharing of power as desirable models in any case, but rather sought to establish a model of the Supreme State which later opened the door to tyranny and enabled rulers to perpetuate their positions in power.

The project of the independent nation state rapidly lost its relevance, and its political message – nationalist, socialist or traditional – also lost ground before a new concept based on cultural identity and fuelled by the blurring of the former distinctions between North and South,



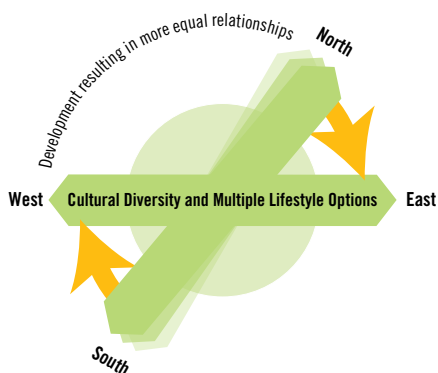
Second Formative Phase: Independent Nation States From National Independence to the Present Day

and between East and West. This blurring of boundaries occurred as the North and West merged in the Arab consciousness to become “the other”: a fusion of Europe, America and other industrialized nations. Thus we shifted to a unilateral form of reductive polarization, aided and abetted by the ongoing expansion of the concept of cultural-religious identity at the expense of both the nationalist and socialist dimensions, which had in turn played a part in suffocating the reformist, modernist messages of the first Renaissance – especially in relation to the creation of a modern state. Indeed, by portraying Western liberalism as an Imperialist project which should be resisted, both nationalist and socialist messages also succeeded in suffocating any attempts at religious reform and the modernization of Arab societies.

The Current Revolution: Start of a Third Formative Phase

The essence of the decline experienced by Arab societies over the past 120 years resides in the rejection of liberal democracy in favor of a strong statist regime, and in the absence of any impetus to modernize the social and cultural domains. On occasion, this has worked to the advantage of the nationalist and socialist ideologies championed by the state; at other times it has benefited fundamentalist religious ideologies or the Salafiya school of thought.

From a historical perspective, the change began in Tunisia during the first months of 2011, and swiftly expanded to include Egypt. Both Tunisia and Egypt succeeded in toppling their regimes through a peaceful protest movement which is still in progress as this article is being written. In my opinion, this change represents the starting point for a new historical phase which is coterminous with modern-day globalization. This phase is equal in importance to the two formative phases described above, the first (the Arab Renaissance) at the beginning of the twentieth century, the second (the drive to create independent nation states) in the second half of the twentieth century. Let us consider not only



Third Formative Phase: Arab Renaissance 2 Youth Uprisings 2011

the general nature of this political movement, but also the previously mentioned reasons why this movement has been so successful and spread so widely – reasons which include the demand for a modern, secular state with a model of governance based on dignity, justice, respect for human rights and the importance of taking turns in power. If we consider these reasons, we find that they represent a return to the ideas underlying the first Arab Renaissance, which revolutionary and traditional state policies have subsequently neglected and marginalized. And yet these ideas were dominant after the Arab world achieved independence. What we are witnessing today is a reaction against the historical lack of democracy, a protest against the contempt for the democratic process displayed by the ideologies and regimes which have ruled the Arab countries since the end of the Second World War. From this perspective, current events should be considered as the beginning of a movement which will result in a second Arab Renaissance during the era of globalization. This, at least, is my belief, even though I am very aware that this protest movement is walking a perilous path along which it will encounter many obstacles and experience both advances and retreats. It will take many years for this movement to make its mark and establish its demands firmly and irreversibly. But for better or for worse, the process has begun.

Concluding Thoughts

I shall now rapidly summarize the status of the current political movement and, for the purposes of this article, condense my ideas into a limited number of points relating to specific groups and issues.

The first group: international agencies, especially in industrialized and donor countries, and international organizations.

I would like to suggest to them all that they should carry out a genuine review of their policies and working methods, and also of their attitudes towards the countries and peoples in the region, in the light of the changes which are currently taking place. These changes leave no room for doubt that their knowledge of the situation and its potential has been very scanty, and that their interventions, policies and programs have been very inadequate.

Today we can see certain weak, hesitant signs that they might be prepared to admit their errors. But these will soon vanish again once matters move on to practical implementation of policies, because heavy political pressure is being exerted on the Arab countries in order to force them back into conformity with the existing political, economic and social programs which were the cause of past and current problems in the first place. The group mentioned above is not acting in a way that genuinely acknowledges their previous errors; instead they continue to apply their former, inadequate attitudes and practices, starting from the premise that Arab societies and countries are mere markets, and continuing to spread the erroneous impression

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that people from the region are desperate to emigrate to Europe, or that they are all terrorists and should be feared. Finally, they continue to advise the Arab countries to return to neo-liberal economic prescriptions.

On the subject of economic and social development, here are a few suggestions on which to ponder:

- Show real concern for the cause of peace in the Arab world, and especially for finding a just solution to the Palestinian issue;
- Refrain from attempting to impose neo-liberal economic policies, and instead actually interact with national and regional mindsets and priorities, staying away from models which have been overthrown;
- Review the approach of international donor countries and parties in supporting development via financing mechanisms and development aid. In addition, review the existing approach towards projects and programs which have shown limited viability and may even create new conditions for local subjugation, as well as wasting energy and resources by pursuing dead-end strategies. This attitude should be replaced by a focus on genuine development achieved through structural changes to policies, frameworks, and practices;
- Take into consideration the political dimension of the development process, and streamline that process by using clear language that is the opposite of the flowering, circumlocutory language used to circumvent the real issues at the heart of development:
 - the issue here is democracy rather than stable, firmly directed governance;
 - the priority should be justice and equality, not just woolly “fairness”
 - it is essential to eliminate a state apparatus which lives on what it can loot, rather than signing treaties aimed at combating corruption;
 - it is vital to strive for equality between women and men in all spheres of

life, not based on a particular “social standing” or “gender”, or on cliques built on the social circles surrounding the wives and relatives of rulers;

- Finally, our societies are passing through a genuinely formative phase, not some mechanical phase of transition from state A to state B, with known characteristics that can be calculated and predetermined by the group which is “assisting” us to reach state B.

The second group: civil society and its institutions in the Arab countries themselves.

There are some important lessons to be learned from the current process of change:

- The organizations and institutions of civil society should have greater confidence in the power of secular government and the ability of a clear concept of human rights to engage the people and inspire movements of radical change. The present moment represents a historic opportunity – which may not arise again in the near future – to implement a democratic transformation and build a modern secular state founded on a real-life agenda, rather than one which seeks to ignore difficulties or complications;
- The conceptual distinction between the *institutions* of civil society on the one hand and civil society itself on the other is a theoretical one familiar to those working in the field. However, it has now become a practical issue, because civil society has expressed itself strongly and directly, bypassing traditional institutional and organizational intermediaries. Institutions and organizations need to find swift ways back to convergence with the needs of civil society by abandoning their restricted organizational perspectives and taking serious steps to transform themselves into social movements. On the other hand, while the civil movement itself has

succeeded in driving forward change despite a lack of formal organization, it must in turn take steps to find new structures and mechanisms whereby the movement and its various component groups may become able not only to exert greater influence during the rebuilding phase which will follow upon the revolutionary phase, but also play a significant role in the creation of a new state and democratic society.

During this formative phase, the revolutionaries – and all other forces of change and democratic transformation – are responsible for ensuring, first and foremost, that the core issues are not lost from sight or abandoned; second, that they do not succumb to the kinds of pressure which may result in the suppression of the secular, modern essence of the movement; and third, that they do not allow the seeds of future tyranny to be sown.

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once again combine with the complex social structures present in Arab countries in such a way that restrictions are imposed on the modern, secular component of the movement for change, and that the abortive experience of the first Arab Renaissance more than 100 years ago is repeated once again. If this happens, the current process of change will stall and the opportunity for a smooth, orderly transition to democracy will be lost, so that any such transition is at best slower, more complicated, and more costly.