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Arab Human Development Report

The US-Led Democratization Project Has a Credibility Problem

Half a year past schedule, the third Arab Human Development Report, 2004 has now been published. The US government had tried to stop its publication. Sonja Hegasy takes a look behind the scenes

Half a year past schedule, the third Arab Human Development Report, 2004 has now been published, on April 5, 2005. Originally planned for publication last October, the date was postponed due to objections to the report's heavy criticism of the Middle East policy of the USA. After the first two reports, which were commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), had been elevated to something of a mantra for the Bush administration, any sections critical of the USA were to be omitted this time around.

However, despite the delay, the American government evidently did not get its wish. Passages like the one in which it is claimed that the Iraqis are doing worse today than under Saddam Hussein are still to be found: "As a consequence of the invasion of their land, the Iraqi people have emerged from the grip of a despotic regime that violated their basic rights and freedoms, only to fall under a foreign occupation that increased human suffering." (AHDR 2005: 5)

Development as the advance of individual freedom

Since 1990, the UNDP has been publishing reports on human development that, following the example of Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, measure development as the advance of individual freedom.

In addition, the UNDP has provided support for 35 national reports in 17 Arab states. The first regional AHDR from 2002 starts out by listing general developmental obstacles in the 22 Arab states. Poor education, limited political freedom and the exclusion of women were cited as the three major deficits.

Plans were made to handle each of these deficits in more detail in the subsequent reports. The second report thus took as its theme the creation of a society of knowledge in the Arab world. In view of the growing knowledge divide between those who have access to the new media and the greater majority of people in the Arab world who do not, the report sketches the reforms that would be necessary to remedy the situation.

Diverging views on the state of freedom the Arab world

The third report carries the subheading: "Towards Freedom in the Arab World." The editors seem to have somewhat contradictory views on this title: while Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, UN Assistant Secretary General and Director, Regional Bureau for Arab States, explained that the region is "moving with greater confidence in a new direction now, and there is a strong awareness of the irreversibility of change," the report's authors warn: "Some gains are undoubtedly real and promising, but they do not add up to a serious effort to dispel the prevailing environment of repression."

The report begins by providing an overview of the key events that have influenced human development in the region since May 2003. The authors take note of the fact that in many Arab countries the call for reforms has grown louder. They refer to the "Declaration of Sana'a" and the statement issued by NGO representatives in Alexandria in March 2004.

On the other hand, they point out that the regional and international environment has exercised a very negative impact on individual rights and freedoms. "Israeli occupation of Palestine continues to impede human development and freedom."

Loss of internal security in Iraq

The report also criticizes that the occupational forces in Iraq have "proved unable to meet their obligations under the Geneva Conventions to protect citizens," causing Iraq to witness an unprecedented loss of internal security.

According to the report, the Americans' marginalization of the UN, undermining of the constitutional state and suspension of central citizens' rights all run counter to their supposed efforts to promote democracy in the region. The main criticisms of the democracy initiatives voiced on the European and Arab side were the USA's failure to seek a bilateral consensus, the utter disregard for the Euro-Mediterranean partnership treaty that has now been in effect for ten years, the normative language used, the undifferentiated treatment of countries from Morocco to Pakistan, as well as the refusal to address the role played by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The democratization project has above all a credibility problem, which evidently does not seem to cause the US government much concern, though. After all, behind the scenes, rumors had been circulating for some time that the Bush administration had threatened to cut the UNDP's budget if the third report were published.

The Egyptian government also voiced its objections. And this despite the fact that the first two reports already contained their fair share of criticism of the national governments and the Middle East policies of the USA – a fact that was, however, studiously overlooked.

The great accolades with which the first two reports were greeted actually damaged the chances for reform based on the recommendations of the AHDR authors. Now, while the authors are regaining their autonomy, the USA's democratization project is forfeiting its last shreds of credibility.

"It makes you weep"

Finally, a group of serious scholars and scientists from across the Arab world has come forward and dared to voice criticism from within and to exert pressure on their respective governments to launch reforms, and the only thing the USA can think to do in response is to resort to that favorite instrument of repressive Arab regimes: silence them! Thus, the USA is once again managing to contradict its own rhetoric of Near East democratization and to discredit each and every initiative coming out of the region itself.

Thomas Friedman, the sharp-tongued New York Times pundit who has been keeping watch over reforms in the Arab world for several years now could only comment, his hopes deflated: "It makes you weep."

The authors of the third AHDR ultimately sketch out three possible alternatives: the scenario of an impending catastrophe, an ideal scenario, and the scenario of reform from within, with the blessings of those outside.

The last of these will only be possible, however, if all those involved respect a series of fundamental principles, entailing, among other things "absolute respect for the tenet that Arabs should find their own way to freedom and good governance through innovation by Arab social forces, without pressure to adopt ready-made models." Experts on political development call this ownership.

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