

## Enlightened Arab Governance

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The last decade or so has shed a stark light on the Middle East, especially the Arab world. Each Arab country has gone through consequential domestic changes, driven by many things, including a youth bulge wherein 65% of the population is below thirty years of age, as well as the global communication revolution, which provided access to information and facilitated congregations. These transformations have, in some cases, taken negative directions due to inefficient or bad governance, and stagnant, irrelevant social contracts between the governing and the governed.

The ability of Arab governments to respond to the needs of their communities was also tested, and occasionally curtailed, by geopolitical turbulence in favour of non-Arab countries in the region. This is in addition to an increase in political tensions between traditional superpowers, i.e. Russia and the United States. Such conflicts have drained resources and fuelled inflation, creating a truly perfect geopolitical and socioeconomic storm.

Domestic, regional, and global dimensions are all interconnected. Successfully addressing them will only occur if dealt with collectively and comprehensively. At the same time, each situation and challenge deserves and requires individual consideration, given their particular specificities, besides the impossibility of dealing with issues of this magnitude all at once. Consequently, my focus here is on domestic considerations, especially issues of governance.

Reflecting on contemporary Arab social trends and political discourses, one is struck by the fact that Arab countries and societies, even preceding the turbulence of the last two decades, seemed to have a generic resistance to change in all walks of life even of an incremental nature, and not just regarding political governance. Throughout the region, one would continuously hear the reference to “Paradigm Permanence” or “constant realities” (*thwabit* in Arabic). Equally indicative is the contemporary colloquial saying “what you know is better than what you do not know.” Such sayings carry many meanings, while also being expressive of a general cultural discomfort with or resistance to change. In fact, they are also indicative of a general discomfort and concern regarding the unknown. These attitudes, when socially ingrained and institutionalized in state governance, curtail creativity and diversity, ultimately leading to stagnation and inefficiency, even with well-intentioned governance.

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The only real predetermined constant is the inevitability of change, at the very least for biological reasons. The Arab attitude is indicative of an inherent and harmful lack of societal confidence, that includes but is not restricted to politics, ultimately leading to regression in societies and their place in the global landscape. Contemporary history testifies to this. The intellectual contribution of the Islamic and Arab world in the arts and sciences was, in many respects, the foundation of the European Renaissance. However, when analyzing the 21st century and recent advancements, the Middle East is seriously lagging behind Europe. It is thus my unwavering belief that this resistance to change extends well beyond politics.

With a general resistance to change pitted against a youthful population impatiently pushing for change, turbulence and occasional turmoil is almost inevitable in the Arab world. While turbulence and turmoil varies from one country to the other, it is noteworthy that turbulence, rather than turmoil, was the case when there has been a more frequent transfer of political leadership, even with the same power authority.

Turmoil was witnessed more frequently where peaceful transfers of public and private power were almost indefinitely postponed. A case in point was that peaceful transfers of governmental power were more prevalent in Arab monarchies from the Atlantic eastwards to the Levant in west Asia, and southwards to the Arabian Gulf. Monarchies prevailed amongst the same families; however, the simple handover of leadership to younger generations allowed for a more constructively aggressive response to challenges of social change. This is evident in Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.

Extended leaderships in Arab republics which did not witness generational change actually challenges resembling turmoil over turbulence. Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen faced more challenges, irrespective of the fact that there were variations in degrees of turbulence versus turmoil from one country to another. The distinction seems to be more in generational transfer of power than forms of government like monarchies over republics. It is interesting to note that, while republics actually held elections, the tenures of the heads of state in these republics far surpassed that of the monarchies. This is additional evidence that resistance to change, rather than the form of government, was paramount.

Irrespective of the kind of government in the Arab world, contemporary and enlightened governance in our region will be contingent on the provision of a number of factors.



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Transparency and efficient governance by authorities or societies requires the availability of information. This is to ensure coordination, evaluation, and checks and balances in both the public and private domains. This should and can be achieved through clearer public enunciation of national concepts and policies, election programs, and socioeconomic data. Transparency is also important with regards to policy and legislative processes, which provide an important level of predictability.

Efficient governance cannot be achieved without several forms and levels of accountability. This is imperative to ensure the best and most legitimate practices. Additionally, accountability should be a vertical process within the same institution. The objective here would be to ensure both quality control and the integrity of standards and practices. Equally important is horizontal accountability between different entities in the domestic landscape to ensure that the common good is the determining factor in the public or private domain.

It is my strong belief that this is applicable to both and even between non-state stakeholders. Governmental accountability at certain stages should be possible by all, and government authorities should have the tools to hold the private sector accountable for national standards and regulations. Needless to say, the general public and individual citizens should also have the right and the tools to engage in the accountability process, be that of their governments' performances or the competitive practice in the private sector to safeguard against monopolies or antitrust.

Term limits for positions of authority in the public or private sector are an invaluable tool to ensure both accountability and transparency, two imperative prerequisites for private or public good governance. Term limits are in themselves structurally ingrained tools that generally create a system of accountability, given the predetermined eventuality that leaders will be replaced by others in social, economic or political spheres. This creates an incentive for good governance and a disincentive against excesses, given the eventuality of the transfer of power, which would open the door for rigorous accountability.

Established term limits, rather than sudden ad hoc changes, are preferable because they allow for smooth transitions. It should be noted that some highly successful business entities, such as Microsoft, Apple, and Facebook (now Meta) did well with longstanding leaders without term limits. The same can be said in the political domain for democratic countries, like Germany and France, which do not have term limits. A successful example often mentioned is former German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who remained in office for many years. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule that term limits are providence, yet we are nevertheless focused on general guidelines. Moreover, in the aforementioned cases, public shareholder engagement and election processes were available and created a systematic, if imperfect, accountability system.



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Transparency, accountability, and term limits are, in my opinion, prerequisites for planting the seeds of enlightened Arab governance. Societies embracing these concepts, and the embodiment of an incumbent stakeholder culture of rights and responsibilities, is imperative for governance to come to fruition.

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