

## **Introduction**

Does it matter if a nation's people aren't given anything politically if in return they aren't asked to contribute economically? This month's debate will examine whether being wealthy and provided for by the state is more important to a society than having the right to vote.

## **Money vs democracy**

62 percent of countries in the world have what is considered to be a democracy: a government created by elections in which every adult citizen has the right to vote. Of the twenty-two member countries of the Arab League, not one is an electoral democracy.

On the Freedom House scale from 1 to 7 of freedom in the world, with one being the freest, the Gulf countries score poorly. Saudi Arabia gets 7, Qatar 6, UAE 6, Bahrain 6 and Kuwait - where in May 2009 parliamentary elections were held for the third time in three years - scores the highest with 4.

Most of the Gulf States don't have free elections, but they do have free market economies which relative to the rest of the world continue to thrive. Last month the IMF forecast steady economic recovery in the GCC region with gs-rich Qatar leading the march with 16% projected GDP growth this year, and 18.6% in 2011.

Qatar has modernised its economic structures and laws to attract private investments, both local and foreign and is utilising its wealth to generate more wealth by diversifying the economic base of the country beyond hydrocarbons.

According to one UAE-based political analyst, countries in the GCC's rationale for economic over political reform is partly a leaf out of the China model. He says "Due to unprecedented economic growth – primarily due to high oil prices and economic diversification – political modernisation efforts in the Gulf states have been measured. It is increasingly being argued that expanding political participation, not democracy, is a better option for a society that is an extended part of a region wracked by chaos... The understanding, therefore, is that democracy can wait, as it did in a few countries in Asia like Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, some of which are vibrant democracies now; Gulf cities like Dubai may not have been able to achieve their current level of economic progress in a politically reformed milieu."

But as Fareed Zakaria writes in 'The Future of Freedom: Illiberal democracy at home and abroad' "Governments with treasure in their soil have it too easy; they are trust-fund states...easy money means a government does not need to tax its citizens. When a government taxes people it has to provide benefits in return, beginning with services, accountability, and good governance but ending up with liberty and representation. This reciprocal bargain – between taxation and representation- is what gives governments legitimacy in the modern world. If a government can get its revenues without forging any roots in society, it is a court, not a state, and its businessmen courtiers, not entrepreneurs."

## **Arab elections – a democratic façade?**

In an article published in October entitled 'Arab Elections: Free, Sort of Fair...and Meaningless', Shadi Hamid, Director of Research at Brookings Doha center writes "...rather than suggesting a bold, if unlikely,

democratic experiment, elections in Bahrain instead reflected a new and troubling trend in the Arab world: the free but unfair – and rather meaningless- election."

The article also states "Something similar will happen on Nov. 9 in Jordan. The Hashemite Kingdom is a close U.S. ally that has grown increasingly proficient at predetermining election results without actually rigging them. It involves gerrymandering at a scale unknown in the West and odd electoral engineering (Jordan is one of only three countries in the world that uses something called Single Non Transferable Vote for national elections). Even when the opposition is allowed to win, the fundamentals do not necessarily change. Parliamentary legislation in countries like Jordan and Bahrain, after all, can be blocked by appointed "Upper Houses." And even if that were not the case, the King (or the President) and his ministers — all appointed — can also kill any threatening legislation... Jordan and Bahrain are not alone. Egypt, too, will face parliamentary elections next month. Meanwhile, a growing number of Arab countries have opted to hold reasonably free elections, including Morocco, Kuwait, and Yemen. But rarely has the discrepancy between the appearance and substance of elections proven so vast. And rarely has so much been fought over so little.

It is somewhat surprising that things turned out this way, just five years after the short-lived but very real "Arab spring." In 2005, most of the Arab opposition — Islamist, liberal, and leftist alike — believed in elections. Elections, however unfair they initially appeared to be, seemed the best mechanism for advancing democratic reform. Islamist groups, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, adopted a political strategy based almost entirely around contesting elections at every level of society. This "elections-first" strategy, for a short while at least, appeared to be working. Islamist groups registered impressive victories across the region. In the 2005 Egyptian elections, the Brotherhood won 20 percent of parliamentary seats, the largest share of any opposition group since Egyptian independence in 1952. In 2006, al-Wefaq, Bahrain's largest Islamist opposition group, won 17 of the 18 seats it contested — a remarkable win percentage of 94 percent.

Hamid continues "But just as Islamist groups adapted to a post-9/11 world in which the U.S. and the international community made democracy a top priority, so too did Arab regimes, which, while resorting to repression when necessary, worked diligently to construct a democratic façade. Some might consider this a workable compromise: Arabs get to vote and let out some steam. Friendly Arab regimes get to maintain their grip on power. After all, with drawdown in Iraq, troubles with Iran, and with Hamas waiting to play spoiler, real democracy — with all of the uncertainty it brings — seems like a luxury the U.S. can live without. Besides, the U.S. has been living without it for more than five decades.

Arabs themselves, however, are unlikely to be as accepting. A rising generation of young Arabs wants to take the promise of democracy seriously, and is growing frustrated with the façade — regardless of how much it pleases international democracy promoters. If free but meaningless elections become the new norm, the Arab opposition may be forced to adopt a more impatient and confrontational approach, one that emphasizes civil disobedience, mass protest, and other "de-legitimization" techniques. This is likely to be a good thing for Arab democracy (at least after the initial messiness and instability) but is less likely to be good for U.S. strategic interests in the region.

The elections in Bahrain, Jordan — and soon in Egypt — might seem to suggest that regimes have matters under control. And they might, but not necessarily for long."