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## When Arab Democrats Are Denied Democracy

by Rami G. Khouri

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BEIRUT -- For too long, self-interested and often hollow-headed politicians in the Arab countries, Israel and the United States (slightly less so in Europe) have ignored the sentiments and aspirations of the Arab majority. They have focused instead on the violent excesses of a small minority of estranged radicals and criminal terrorists who have hijacked the global debate on this region.

Ultimately, neither charismatic killer demagogues like Saddam Hussein or Osama Bin Laden, nor cosmic-grade cheerleaders for liberty's apocalypse like George Bush, will define the collective history of the people of the Middle East. Instead, the path to a stable, productive future for this region lies in understanding more carefully the sentiments of the middle class majorities that inevitably must define their own political cultures, ideologies and policies. Presumably, that is what democracy and majority rule are all about.

One of the truly historic recent developments in the Arab world in the past decade or so has been the ability to conduct public opinion polling in many countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, UAE, Yemen and a few others, providing crucial insights into what our populations feel, fear and desire.

Yet another new public opinion poll released this week in Jordan confirms two significant points that most of the mediocre leaders in this region and abroad have preferred to ignore: ordinary Arabs (mostly Muslims!) are strongly committed to democratic values and principles, but they are also deeply concerned and fearful about how they are treated in their own countries.

The nationwide random sample poll of adults by the independent Jordan Center for Social Research conducted at the end of July showed huge majorities in favor of electing local officials, keeping and expanding the quota for women in parliament, keeping the one-person, one-vote system, equal work opportunities for men and women, and using peaceful political participation and protest (rather than violence) as the way to change the government. Jordanians identified the most important problems facing their country as the rising cost of living, unemployment, corruption, worsening economic conditions, and poverty, along with the rising gap between rich and poor.

The most striking result of this poll is the nearly schizophrenic attitude of ordinary Jordanians to political values and their real life conditions. While they aspire to democratic practices and a very strong sense of justice, they also feel mistreated and subjugated by their own society. Only 39 percent of respondents said they would be treated fairly and justly in a court of law, 12 percent in a university entrance exam, 9 percent in a police investigation, 6 percent in a job allocation and 1 percent in a tax office. Good morning? Anyone home?

This is yet another confirmation that Arabs and Muslims love freedom, democracy, equality and justice, but they are angry and bitter because they do not feel they are enjoying these important values in their own societies. This helps to explain the sense of resentment and anger that often translates into political extremism, or people turning to their religion for comfort and hope. In the most extreme consequence, enter Osama Bin Laden, and angry young men become suicide bombers. More routinely, citizens turn to peaceful Islamist groups to express their anger and indignity; the poll found that the most popular political group in Jordan was the Islamic Action Front, for whom 37 percent of citizens would vote, against 27 percent for Jordanian nationalist parties.

There is more that also confirms the contradictory sentiments that define ordinary Arabs, in this case Jordanians; but I am certain, from my own travels and extensive research and readings, that this situation pertains throughout all the Arab states. Citizens emphatically do trust some national institutions (93 percent trust the police and army "fully or to a large degree", 84 percent religious leaders, 76 percent the government), but only 36 percent trust political parties and 56 percent trust municipalities (the media comes in at 63 percent). [Interested readers can contact the center for a copy of the poll, at mjcsr@go.com.jo.]

What to conclude? Good Arabs and Muslims with fine, egalitarian, law-abiding values have found themselves living in societies that do not reflect those values in practice. This is also what I heard when I phoned the director of the survey, the sociologist Dr Musa Shteivi, for his own interpretation of the results, who was quite categorical: "The people of Jordan seem very committed to democratic ideals, both at the value and procedural levels, but they are also a troubled people who are very concerned about the degree of fairness in their society."

They are also not sure about whether the country is heading in the right direction politically and economically, he said, citing that 48 percent of respondents think things are moving in the right direction, while 44 percent think they are moving in the wrong direction. He senses

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that many Jordanians are alienated from their civil and government institutions, such as political parties and parliament, and are not sure that these institutions are working for their best interests. He also detects a gap between elite and popular sentiments on key political issues, also suggesting some alienation.

Good morning? Any takers for the simple idea that Arabs and Muslims love freedom and justice, but hate being denied it in their own societies?

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