

The Mission of Human Rights in an Increasingly Dangerous and Repressive Region*

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First: A New Phase
The Subsiding Fourth Wave of Democratisation
And the "Splattering of Mud"

The Arab world is living on the edge of a volcano as a result of the current volatile interaction of a number of elements: the increasing influence and spread of terrorist groups; escalating Sunni / Shiite sectarian violence; the phenomenon of private non-political militias; the growing influence of religious extremism within both the political and social realms; increased political authoritarianism; the continuing entrenchment of the police state; the increasing targeting of human rights defenders and democracy advocates within the larger regional context of a qualitative deterioration in the conditions of human rights in general; and finally, the constant signs of probable civil and/or regional wars in and between a number of countries.

The “death boats” crossing the Mediterranean in the hope of attaining a blissful life in a European “paradise,” the continuing waves of suicide bombers hoping to reach “eternal paradise,” and the millions of Iraqi and Sudanese refugees crossing the "fault lines" in Iraq and Sudan, or crossing seas and borders (even those of Israel's!) are only the warning flares of a volcano that is only starting to rumble. When fully active its lava will erupt beyond all borders and expectations, so much so that the new “9/11” will be much worse than even what the most pessimistic expect. Reaching this point was never inevitable; a number of factors have contributed to the creation of the current situation. At the forefront of these factors is the breaking of the fourth wave of democratisation in the Arab world.

After three global waves of democratic transformation failed to sweep over the forbidding shores of the Arab world, the fourth wave broke at the feet of the impregnable Arab fortifications, content to have swept through the fortresses of Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. This is despite the fact that on its way to the shores of the Arab world the fourth wave had a tremendous driving force pushing it towards this particular area, in large part due to the 9/11 attacks and the bombings in London and Madrid and the ensuing specially-designed plans, whether European (the “Neighbourhood Policy”), American (the “Partnership Initiative”), or international (the G8’s “Forum for the Future”), which included the earmarking and disbursement of millions of dollars for these purposes.

Ironically, these same Arab fortifications so powerful against democracy crumbled before invasions and foreign occupation. During the period under consideration here (2001-5) parts of the West Bank, Gaza and South Lebanon were reoccupied, in addition to the occupation of the whole of Iraq. Sometimes this happened with the assistance of some Arab countries that had stood firm against the waves of democracy. Yet, not a single Arab country moved towards democracy in this same period. Indeed, all of this marks a major setback, not only as regards the objective of realising democracy, but also in comparison to the conditions prevalent in the Arab world before the 11th of September 2001.

Features of the subsiding of the fourth wave of democratisation include:

- The waning of the EU's political will regarding the Neighbourhood Policy in the Arab world. This was reflected in developing bilateral working plans that were closer to literary texts. They constituted no concrete practical obligations, and made it difficult for the ENP partners, or any third party such as civil society, to formulate concrete indicators to evaluate them or assess progress.
- The G8's Forum for the Future giving up its main objective, which was meant to be a forum for equal dialogue between Arab governments and civil society so that concrete effects on the reform process could be created. Instead it has become a forum for grandstanding, unable to even issue a single meaningful political statement. The Forum has not only marginalized the role of civil society organisations, it has allowed governments to join in representing those organisations or even choosing their representatives.
- The transformation of the US Middle East Partnership Initiative into a mere giant financial arm for money-pumping. Funding by the US Partnership is sometimes offered under headings that are unrelated to its objectives (especially since most credible organisations choose not to deal financially with the US Partnership or USAID). Funding is also wasted in insignificant programs because of the mistaken political diagnosis of the nature of the existing Arab regimes (i.e. an assumption that a number of them desire to democratise), or because of not wanting to offend friendly regimes that offer vital political and security services.
- The serious deterioration, verging on a collapse, in the performance of forces advocating reform from within Arab societies, including the fact that the political mobilisation of the last two years has not succeeded in bringing about new facts to bear on the balance of forces, on which is hugely tipped in favour of the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world. Those regimes have already initiated a counter-attack to forestall any probability of a renewed political mobilisation.
- New international actors (Russia, China and Iran), which do not have a democratic agenda, and, on the contrary, stand opposed to an international democratic agenda, are taking influential political and economic action in the region, at a time when American influence is waning (and will continue to do so) after the failure of the Iraq project.

The first three indicators took clear shape after the Muslim Brothers won 20% of the seats of the Egyptian parliament in December 2005, and after Hamas secured the majority in the Palestinian elections in January 2006. Some commentators see this development as the cause of the change in the American and European (and hence international) position on democratic reform in the Arab world.

External Factors:

It was not a slow process of deterioration; it was more like “the straw that broke the camel's back.” From the very moment these successive international initiatives for reform in the Arab world were announced they lacked the necessary political will to drive them resolutely to achieve their goals. They were more like declarations of

political intent then an accurate diagnosis accompanied by practical plans. This can be attributed to the following:

- The tug of war has not been settled between the European and American priority concerning security interests in the Arab world (which require securing the stability of the current regimes in most Arab countries) and the new post-9/11 priority of democratisation at the expense of these regimes (and the security interests protected by them).
- The schism between Europe and the US, not only regarding the legitimacy and validity of the invasion of Iraq, but also in relation to the central idea of the project of democratic reform in the Arab world (i.e. the close connection between the aggravation of the threats of terrorism and the lack of democracy), and also regarding the road map to reform (pace of change, means and necessary pressures). These differences were not confined behind closed doors; they were expressed publicly, and often heavy-handedly, such as happened in the G8 summit (Atlanta 2004), the EU-US summit (Dublin 2004), and in the public deliberations and back-stage meetings of the Forum for the Future.
- Although the US was the more enthusiastic and clamorous in raising the slogan of democratic reform (the US stood directly behind two initiatives out of three), America was more divided than Europe on the urgency and validity of this objective. Such a division was not only between Republicans and Democrats, but also within the US administration itself, which seemed inescapably schizophrenic. On one hand the US calls for the respect of human rights in the Arab world, and with the other, commits a number of the most blatant violations of human rights in Guantanamo and Abu-Ghraib and elsewhere! In the morning they call for democratic reform in some countries, and at night they use the secret prisons of those same countries to torture those whom the CIA's illegal rendition flights deliver for the purpose of extorting confessions. On top of this is the Bush administration's public defence of a non-commitment to human rights standards (especially as regards torture) or to international humanitarian law (in relation to the prisoners at Guantanamo). This is not to say that Europe has not suffered divisions. The European division has not changed, it remains the typical pre-9/11 division between the Northern countries (more interested in human rights in the Arab world) and the countries of South Europe (that are more understanding of, and more in tandem with, the authoritarian governments of the region).
- The incorrect diagnosis of the nature of most of the Arab ruling regimes as having a will to reform (while they in fact stand against it) played a great role in defeating the purposes of financial assistance to the advocates of reform and civil society organisations. A great part of such assistance went to the governments and governmental organisations, under the illusion that they would be used in activities to push the wheels of reform. Or went into programs imported from the experiences of countries that are on the route of democratisation, and which are not suitable for authoritarian and anti-democratic states. An example of this is the programs for activating political and electoral participation, election monitoring, developing electoral systems, and other programs that focus on the technical aspects of democracy. A good part of the American financial support was spent on these programs while left no mark, largely because the citizens of these countries do not consider themselves as players – that is, they do not trust the existing regimes, nor do

they trust the elections run by those regimes, and possibly they do not believe that change can take place through elections, however much they seem to be technically improved.

With the exception of press releases and financial remittances to the region in general, the years of the world's high-pitched talk of democratic reform in the Arab world (2004-5) did not in effect address more than very few Arab countries. The region witnessed no concrete working plan on the ground or collective and sustained international political pressure for reform.

The fact is that the wave of democratic reform was exhausted even before it reached the Arab shores. Hence, with the return of Europe and the US to their pre-9/11 positions, the fourth wave left behind it no significant mark on the ground, nor did it leave an instance of reform, whether constitutional, legislative or institutional, nor a change in the relations of power. This is despite the fact that the ink is not yet dry on the texts of the agreements and working plans of the EU Neighbourhood Policy, the fiery speeches about the US-Middle East Partnership, and the minutes of the Forum for the Future meetings. The same applies to the announcements and instruments establishing the huge funding channels set up according to those initiatives.

The best achievement of such temporary change in the international discourse on reform in the Arab world is that it acted as a *temporary* and intermittent restraint on the security arm in some countries (essentially Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia), which led, again temporarily, to widening the margin of public political debate and of protest in the streets (in Egypt) and media for a short while. When the international community turned a new page and turned their back on these reformers, the security arm went back to its unbridled sway, and the street was "freed" from protest movements which came to be limited to some salons and some sections of the media. Yet there is no guarantee that even this narrow margin might not be further restricted or closed down altogether.

The "Tunisian model" crystallises the value of the international reform initiatives. Tunisia has been the spoiled child of the EU, before and after the international calls for reform. It is also the "address" chosen by the US for the administrative headquarters of its initiative to democratise the Arab world. In the two years of loud "talk" about reform, the police state has not stopped for a moment the practice of violent repression, even during the convening of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society! The government even froze European financial assistance to the leading Tunisian human rights organisation without any European or American reaction commensurate with such humiliation and brutal repression. Hence, it is not very surprising that the US State Department considers the new constitutional changes in Egypt (which aim at entrenching the foundations of the police state and endow its practices with constitutional protection) as a step on the road to reform! Nor was it surprising that the EU has blessed these changes indirectly by limiting its criticism to the fact that they were passed hastily through parliament, without sparing a single word about the worst legislative and constitutional setback in Egypt since the first constitution put in place by the July 1952 movement.

The best example to express the emptiness of the American project to democratise the Arab world is the fact that the very state (Egypt) on which they bet to lead the democratic transformation in the region was precisely the one that adeptly led a systematic counter-offensive on the local, regional and international levels, and became, through this counter attack, more despotic and authoritarian than when the American project was launched!

Internal Factors:

On the internal level, and despite the fact that the forces of reform in the Arab world have had no respite in calling for reform for four decades (at least since the military defeat of June 1967), and despite the fact that one of the main obstacles before these forces was the external support offered to authoritarian regimes, it has to be admitted that the basic conditions for the internal interaction with the fourth wave of democratisation have been lacking, and this is due to the absence of the elements that would constitute a social basis for reform. With the exception of Morocco, and the latest development in Mauritania, the ruling regimes in the Arab countries lacked the necessary will to embark on political reform, and hence all their efforts during 2004-5 were spent on trying to relieve and absorb external and internal pressures. Much of these efforts also went into exacerbating the internal contradictions in the other fronts, whether internal or external, and making an alliance with “the devil” to forestall reform. The outstanding adroitness with which the Arab ruling regimes, under the leadership of Egypt, managed this decisive crisis deserves to be an object lesson in the study of crisis-management. If only these regimes had been managing their societies and providing for its needs with a mere five percent of such adeptness they might not have needed any reform!

The main features of the stratagems of the Arab regimes:

- Claiming that they have changed their skin, and have decided to respond to the calls of reform. Examples include the Arab Summit convened in Tunis in May 2004, which included on its agenda for the first and last time in the history of Arab summits the issue of reform and democracy. They also include the Sanaa and Alexandria conferences for Arab Reform organised by the governments of Yemen and Egypt respectively in January and March 2004. The two conferences adopted certain documents that were discarded into the dustbin by the Arab governments after they fulfilled their function, namely pacifying and absorbing the pressures of civil society.
- Responding favourably to international programs offering financial assistance in the field of democracy, and facilitating the convening of conferences, workshops and seminars with the participation of elements from the government, especially in the Gulf States, Jordan and Egypt. This latter, however, obstructed the opening of offices of American organisations, but did not stop the American organisations already existing in Egypt from receiving funding for democracy training.
- Raising the slogan of “cultural specificity” of Arab societies, and that reform comes only “from within”, with the aim of checking the momentum of the international community’s calls for reform from “outside.” Which ended in the rejection of all calls for reform whether from within or without.

- Raising the slogan of gradualism, arguing that the democratisation process took hundreds of years in European societies. In practice, this did not lead to taking a single step forward but several steps back in such countries as Egypt, Syria and Bahrain.
- Trying to undermine the international consensus on the importance of reform in the Arab world and the methods of bringing it about, by seeking to widen the gap between the different positions within the US political class and between the EU and the US.
- Offering Europe and the US more attractive offers for servicing their security interests in the region, especially given the rise of new regional security challenges in light of the following: the evident failure of the American project in Iraq; Hamas reaching power in Palestine; the rise of Iran as a regional power; the exacerbation of the threat of exporting terrorism. Yet, such offers did not involve practically any serious contribution to putting an end to any conflict. For the common strategy of the Arab regimes has always been to keep regional conflicts hot, in order to stoke the national security concern at all times. They employ such concern with their peoples and political, cultural elite in order to keep their attention focused on the "external enemy", and, thus, indirectly support the legitimacy of their continued existence without change. This strategy however stops short of letting these conflicts heat up to the extent of threatening the interests of these regimes.
- The skilful use of the Islamists as a scarecrow to dampen the enthusiasm of the calls for reform, whether by the international community or the local political class – liberals, leftists, secularists and nationalists. Egypt offers the most astute example: the last parliamentary election took place for the first time without any member of the Muslim Brothers in prison. They had been all released several days before the elections to enjoy, during the first stage, and the first round of the second stage, the best political and security atmosphere in any elections in the last twenty five years! This had direct results, as the Muslim Brothers were able to hold 20% of parliamentary seats. It was an excellent tactical win for the Islamists, yet it turned into a strategic win for the Egyptian regime, and other Arab regimes, as it helped settle the debate about the European and American priorities to the benefit of regional security interests at the expense of the democratic reform of the Arab world.
- Coordinating with the powerful Israeli lobby in the American congress on the grounds of common interests against political reform, especially since the rise of the Islamists (the common enemy of those regimes and of Israel's) in the elections in Egypt and Palestine.
- Stoking religious sentiments against the "crusading" West, and seizing the opportunity of the Danish cartoons to fan the flames of a wide political, media and popular mobilisation, not even refraining from facilitating attacks on embassies and setting them on fire, all in an attempt to distract attention from local contradictions and direct it towards the foreign threats that "target" Islam.
- Raising the flying colours of "women's rights" and organising a huge number of meetings and conferences, with the presence of the "first ladies" of the Arab countries, typically under the auspices of the Arab League. Making concessions in this regard does not reflect directly on the political system and the balance of forces. Such concessions also help reduce the international pressures towards reform, as they seem to be getting something at least!

- Finally, all forms of repression (security, legislative, media, and administrative) continued unabated during the two years of “reform”, including using the media to wage intensified campaigns of character assassination against the newly rising political symbols.

In addition to the astute efforts of regimes in the Arab world, the non-ruling elites in this region were not ready to lead the process of reform. They have suffered, historically and for several consecutive decades, from systematic and organised repression, with the assistance or collusion of the international community. This has caused them to be always limited in number, fragile and fissured, and always easy to manipulate politically or through the security services. This is especially the case in societies where political, administrative and financial corruption is so widespread as to go far beyond all the assessments of international organisations working against corruption in the region.

Democratic reform has never been a solid priority for any significant sector of these elites. They have been concerned with other priorities, in particular Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, or the confrontation with the West in general. Hence, it is not a complete surprise to find that certain active sectors of these elites stand in the frontline of the confrontation with their own local regimes and ruling forces (on issues of democracy and human rights) while they support the anti-reform regimes in Syria, Lebanon, Sudan and others, and hold funerals in several Arab capitals to honour the mass-murdering “martyr” Saddam Hussein.

The conduct of significant sections and figures of these elites has been risible and morally abhorrent. They shed tears for the absence of democracy in their countries while stabbing it in the back in broad daylight in other countries! They cry in grief for the violated human rights in their countries while glorifying mass murderers in others, even raising them to the level of historic heroes! They appeal for the help of the international community to put an end to collective rape of Muslim women in Bosnia while they find it deplorable that the world rallies to help the Muslim women being raped in Darfur! These views and positions, contradictory, hypocritical and lacking in any moral appeal, stand as one of the biggest obstacles to the possibility of enlarging the social base for reform.

One of the main weaknesses in the constitution of these elites is the frailty of the human rights component in the outlook of some of their sectors. This has led some of them to slide into embracing some forms of the governmental anti-human rights discourse, or to refuse to include in their platforms a number of vital human rights issues such as the issues of religious and ethnic minorities, women’s rights, the freedoms of thought, belief and literary and artistic creativity, which, in turn, has had a negative effect on their ability to widen their bases of social support. An interesting irony in this regard is that “Kefaya” movement in Egypt. This movement steered clear of including the legitimate and vital demands of the Copts in their platform. The choice of a Copt at its head (a development the like of which Egypt has never known) did not succeed in bridging this gap and attracting the support of Copts.

The chronic failure of these elites to reach a consensual and creative solution for the issue of the relation between religion and state played a role in making democracy seem in the view of some sections of these elites a danger no less menacing than the

persistence of the current despotic regimes, more so even, given that democracy could bring the Islamists to power. An example of this is the position taken by sections of the leftist, secular and liberal elites in Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt (we can add the Copts as a group in the latter). They have come to fear the consequences of “democracy” more than those of the continuation of despotism.

This pattern of contradictions and paradoxes has always made it possible for the ruling regimes to manipulate, politically and through security services, vital sections of these elites, in order to set them against each other, and to create a confidence gap between them. This lack of trust has made it impossible for them to forge a strategic consensus that is able to subsist even for a few weeks. Yet, the ruling elite has been always able to forge tactical short-term alliances with one or another section of the non-ruling elite against the others.

On the level of perspective and tactics, some of the new political groups embraced some exaggerated visions of their impact on the ground and / or the efficacy and stability of the international position in favour of political reform, and / or the weakness of the ruling regimes in a number of Arab countries, as well as the local relations of power. Based on such unrealistic assessments some of these groups adopted self-defeating political and mobilisation tactics and / or highly confrontational slogans against the ruling regimes, and / or set fantastical targets for their activism that were unrelated to the realities of the masses that have been excluded from the arena of politics and mass struggle for decades. All of this led to utter failure to widen the ranks of these groups or attract mass support, and led to exhausting the energies of a limited vanguard in actions of which remain nothing but historical and media impact.

Because of this weak stand on human rights, political and intellectual fragility, and political splintering, there has been no momentum towards democracy from within. Instead, there have only been romantic yearnings for democracy expressed loudly and boisterously, yet without the willingness to offer the necessary price and sacrifice. It would be a mistake to reduce this to the individual readiness to sacrifice one’s life or security; it is rather gauged as the willingness to pay the political price; that is, to sacrifice for the profound belief in the priority of reform any other local, regional or international considerations, and the willingness to make mutual concessions between the non-ruling elites in order to be able to form a pole, a real number in the political equations, that is able to make a break from the status quo, even if limited, or cause a chink in the ruling elite's monopoly of power and wealth.

Previously a CIHRS paper titled “**The Priorities and Mechanisms of Reform in the Arab World**” (July 2004) offered an early prognosis for the necessary conditions for political reform as follows:

- The presence of a solid political will on the part of the political and cultural elites, and a consensus on the absolute priority that political reform should have on their agendas over and above any other considerations of whatever importance.
- Reaching a creative and consensual solution for the relation between religion and state, without prejudice to the core issue of reform, and without this leading to substitute one despotic regime for another.
- Reaching consensus on a minimum program of reform in each country.

- The presence of a political will for reform on the part of the ruling elite, or, at the very least, that they do not concede to the use of violence to suppress the reform movement.

Due to these internal and external factors the fourth wave of democratisation failed to cross the territorial waters of the Arab world.

It goes without saying that the complete and utter failure of the project of democratising Iraq through invasion and occupation has had an additional restricting effect on the international community's vacillating will and on the internal processes in the region. In fact, there was nothing more criminal and brainless than the invasion of Iraq except the reckless and irresponsible way the US managed the process of rebuilding Iraq after toppling Saddam Hussein's regime.

The exacerbation of the tragedy of the Palestinian people in the same period because of the unlimited political and diplomatic support that the US offered Israel, which reached unprecedented levels, has also played a large role in undermining whatever credibility was left for its project of democratising the Arab world. This has been made particularly clear in the light of the European / US reservations on the results of the last Palestinian parliamentary elections, which were the freest and fairest in the Arab world!

Moreover, the hike in oil prices in the same period provided the Arab regimes with windfall profits that helped them widen their margin of manoeuvrability with their peoples. In addition to filling the coffers of terrorist groups and religious extremists, which further assisted the counter-offensive.

Indicators of the counter-offensive: "The Splattering of Mud":

The matter however did not stop at the subsiding of the fourth wave; rather a counter-offensive gathered pace as the wave receded. The most salient of its features are:

- The growth of the forces of terrorism in the Arab world. These groups established a major base in a new country - Iraq, which was not on their map before. In addition, they returned to Egypt, finding a home in a completely new region (Sinai). New cells sprang to life and carried out operations of differing degrees of violence in other countries (Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon, and Gaza), with the continuation of the intermittent actions of sleeper cells in Saudi Arabia and Yemen.
- The violent rise of sectarian and confessional identity in the region. The sectarian Sunni / Shiite tension moved to the level of an intermittent civil war in Iraq, which reflected itself in the escalation of sectarian tensions in the region, particularly in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. In addition to the imminent danger of Iraq sliding into a bloodier unremitting civil war that leads to partition, another type of war has started in Yemen between the army and the Huthis (Shiite Zaydi sect) in Saada, for sectarian and political reasons. Furthermore, the threat of a civil war in Lebanon, for regional, political and sectarian causes, has been reignited.
- The growing phenomenon of private militias that constitute a unique mix of runaway offshoots of regular factions (lacking any political agenda), gangs which plunder and loot, and gangs of mercenaries that are paid to kill and

kidnap. Iraq and Palestine are the most prominent examples of places where this is occurring.

- The rise in popular support for political Islamic forces, given the bankruptcy and corruption of the current regimes and closing of all doors of reform before any other alternatives, while these forces have an agenda that is perhaps more benighted (the examples of Palestine, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia). Such support has been reflected in the increasing tendency of the Arab governments to add a religious hue to their despotic regimes, such as Egypt and Syria, in an attempt to shore up their long bankrupt legitimacy.
- Arab governments' intensification of repression after they realized that the international community had lost interest in the issue of reform. Repression surpassed its level prior to these international initiatives. Examples include Syria and Egypt, which put in place a number of very serious constitutional amendments that, for the first time, provide constitutional protection for the exceptional repressive powers enjoyed by the security services outside of judicial oversight. This is in addition to the unprecedented extension of the role of exceptional courts, particularly of a military nature, at the expense of normal courts. All of these have been used to boost and entrench the project of the police state.
- The defeat of the forces of reform in Iran after Khatemi, and the rise of the more conservative forces that stand against modernisation and democracy and are more willing to employ sectarian identity in their regional projects.

These indicators mean that there are two possible scenarios for the Arab region. The less bitter involves the continuation, for an indefinite period, of volatile sectarian tension (in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia) that sometimes takes the form of intermittent bloody violence, such as in Iraq and Yemen, or ethnic and political conflict in places like the south of Sudan and the intermittent bloody violence in Darfur, accompanied by political systems that are either police states or where repression is on the rise and unchecked by sufficient resistance.

The more bitter one involves the interaction of the above-mentioned factors leading to civil wars in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Sudan (in case the South moves towards separation, which is very likely), as well as consequences that are not less bloody in Syria, the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the probable scenario of an unremitting civil war in Iraq between a Shiite majority and a Sunni minority could lead to a more visible support for the Sunnis on the part of Egypt and Saudi Arabia (the same could be said of Lebanon), and could also lead to a direct military intervention by Iran, and perhaps even Turkey if the Kurds in the north declare independence while Sunni and Shiite Arabs fight each other. This is in addition to other probable wars that are unrelated to the internecine Arab conflicts, such as an American or an Israeli bombing of Iran to abort their nuclear program, or perhaps new rounds of Arab / Israeli battles that are possible at any time, especially with Lebanon and / or Syria.

This second scenario means that the Arab region would be a volcano spewing its fiery in all directions, beyond the region in all probability. The "splattering of mud" or the counter-offensive waged by the forces of terror, religious extremism, sectarian violence, political authoritarianism and police repression will not be confined to the walls of the Arab world, however high they may be. It will have dire and

unprecedented consequences on the condition of human rights in the entire region, and beyond. In order to imagine how dire it might be it is enough to note that the intermittent civil war in Iraq has already led to another “Palestinian” tragedy: more than two million Iraqis were displaced to neighbouring countries in the last two years alone, this on top of the internal displacement of 2 to 9 million more Iraqis. I wonder how many refugees and displaced will be created by an open civil war involving overt and covert regional military interventions? In such a tense and overheated region, even a country such as Morocco (the only one to have had their own reform project before 9/11) will not be spared the eruptions spill over.

Powerful roaring waves sweep away barriers and overflow the shores. Weak and waning waves on the other hand do nothing but stir up the bottom and muddy the waters. The fourth wave of democratisation has not only receded, it has also stirred up the “mud” in the bottom, which is now being splattered across the region! A limited dose of antibiotics can sometimes be more harmful, as it can make the germs more resistant to medicine and more vigorous.

These bleak factors and the above-mentioned probable grim scenarios require a reconsideration of the strategies, tasks and programmes of the local, regional and international human rights organisations working in the region and any other concerned parties. Even with the variation or differences in the picture of the not-unforeseen future, it is not doubted that conditions in most countries in the region have changed much, especially in view of the rosy hopes raised by the false spring of 2004-5.

Even in the less bitter scenario, human rights defenders will pay a higher price than ever exacted by the police state (police harassment, closing down organisations, arrest and detention, unfair trials, kidnapping). It could also reach the level in which these defenders are targeted and killed by religious extremist or terrorist groups or private militias. This is the prevalent pattern in many areas of Iraq, and it is the reason why many human rights organisations there refuse to publicise their addresses, even when participating in conferences outside Iraq.

The plans and programs that were developed to encourage and activate the reform process have been outdated; and should be placed on the archive shelves, in order to make room for new plans and programs that can help stymie the counter offensive and help strengthen reform, but in a completely different political context. If we can not recognise this fact, and adapt, then we are doomed to continue our jubilant marching celebration without realising that it is actually a funeral procession we are walking in.

There is no chance for stopping the region from this downward spiral unless the international community hastens to forge a more comprehensive and resolute reform initiative that would combine the requirements of democratic transformation and respect of human rights; combating terrorism, extremism and corruption; the immediate putting into force of a just solution for the Palestinian problem; and placing “failed” states such as Iraq under a United Nations mandate (Namibia before independence is a good example for this type of plan). This, however, requires both ruling and non-ruling elites in the Arab world to rise to the level of such grave challenges.

Second: How the Human Rights Movement Responded to the Changing Reality

The responses of civil society varied in the following ways:

- Constructive engagement with the requirements of the limited political openness of 2004-5. This took the form of developing programs, priorities and mechanisms to push towards political reform, as well as offering moral support to the new political groups and taking part in scrutinising the international reform initiatives, analysing the new challenges and exposing the collective or individual manoeuvres of the ruling regimes in the Arab world. It also included crystallising collective local and regional positions regarding these developments, in coordination with international organisations. This was also the case when the Arab regimes moved from manipulating the slogan of reform to the overt counter attack against the forces of reform.
- Making use of the increasing funding of human rights organisations in the region, by building their capacities, developing new programs or setting up new organisations.
- Founding new “business oriented” organisations that lack any “mission,” save for seeking funding by continually altering their functions, programs and activities to fit with the agendas of funding agencies. A number of the existing organisations altered their role or their activities for the same purpose. Some funding agencies of the US government played an assisting role in this regard.
- Some Arab governments and their supporters have also seized this opportunity to establish organisations for this very purpose. In the same vein, a number of American organisations and academic institutions closely-related to the US government opened offices or organised cultural activities or training activities related to democracy in a number of Arab countries, Egypt and Jordan in particular, with the financial support of governmental funding agencies. Moreover, some political groups (most prominently the Muslim Brothers) established “human rights” organizations with agendas that do not go beyond the selective human rights ceiling of such groups.
- Failing to realize the insincerity of the Arab regimes in raising the slogan of reform, and failing to detect the later transformation in the priorities of the international community as regards the issue of reform or the change in the behaviour of the Arab regimes. Such failure led organisations to continue to develop and implement plans and programs that are irrelevant to the current political context and hence ineffectual or have very limited effect. On the other hand, some organizations, in one country or another, ignored serious reform moves that the concerned government took
- The growth in programs designed for raising awareness and disseminating the culture of democracy, with special emphasis the technical aspects, and the founding of new organisations for this purpose. On the other hand there was a decline in the programs and tasks of advocacy, protection, and monitoring.
- Adapting to the new realities where the movements for change dwindled, the international community back-pedalled, the governments had more clout, and their security grip grew tighter. This adaptation took the form of dropping the critical positions against the governments or taking favourable positions, or

limiting criticism to the political Islamic groups and religious extremism couching it in human rights phraseology.

- Taking no interest in coordination or networking between human rights organisations, including coordinating with a view to forge common stands regarding new and huge challenges, or even sliding into bitter recrimination sometimes.

The above remarks are no substitute for the necessity of making a comprehensive survey of human rights organisations in the Arab world, their orientations and programs, in the period from 2003 to 2007. It is likely that such a survey would reveal a huge qualitative and quantitative growth in the organisations and programs that specialise in disseminating the culture of democracy and providing training on some of its technical aspects as against a decline, both quantitative and qualitative, in the percentage and performance of the organisations working for monitoring violations, human rights advocacy and protection. This decline sometimes reached the level of collapse, as is the case with the only regional organisation for the protection of human rights. Whereas it is difficult to detect the rise of new organisations in this field in that period except perhaps in Syria. Such a development raises crucial questions and places new tasks on the agenda as well.