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Can the 'China model' offer the Arab world an alternative to the West?

Mark Habeeb

“Trying to remake the world in the Western image no longer seems to be a viable project.”

Western governments and civil society organisations long have advocated for more democracy in the Arab world, defined in terms of Western political systems: constitutions that guarantee individual rights; one-person, one-vote elections; multiparty legislatures; independent judiciaries; heads of state with limited powers and civilian control over military and security forces. The message in a nutshell: “You should be more like us.”

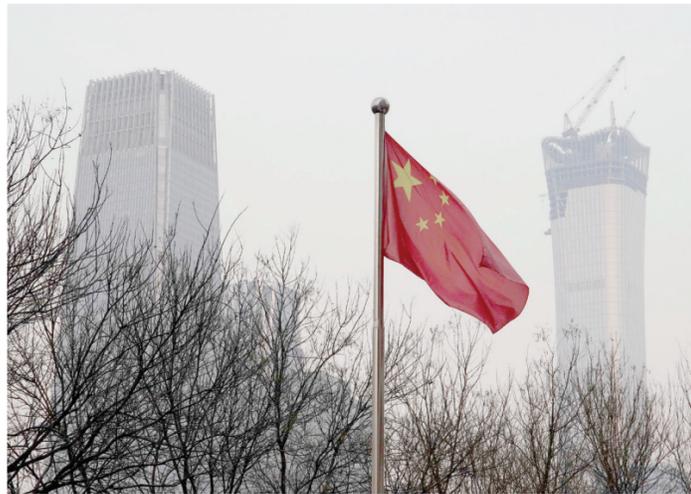
Democracy advocacy accelerated after the fall of the Soviet Union. Western powers, especially the United States, no longer valued anti-communism over democracy and began to criticise the very governments that it had armed and bolstered during the Cold War.

A veritable democracy industry arose in Washington, as non-profits and think-tanks jumped onto the democracy bandwagon, producing reports and critiques and conducting programmes in the Arab world designed to instil Western political values.

The pinnacle of the democracy movement came during the administration of President George W. Bush, when a phalanx of so-called neocons seized ideological control of US foreign policy with the mission of imposing democracy on the Arab world, starting with Iraq in 2003. Their argument was that democratic governments in the Arab world were the best way to combat religious extremism, expand neo-liberal economics, and – importantly to the neocons – make peace with Israel.

The Iraq invasion and its calamitous aftermath, however, demonstrated that democracy-at-the-barrel-of-a-gun was not such a wise policy.

Then, in 2011, the Arab world erupted: The “Arab spring” offered



Different model. China World Trade Center Tower III (L) and China Zun Tower stand behind a Chinese flag in Beijing's central business area, on December 14. (Reuters)

hope to Western democracy advocates that finally, at last, Arabs had seen the light and would replace authoritarian regimes with vibrant, multiparty, Western-style democracies.

This did not happen – except in Tunisia, which is still a work in progress.

By 2017, the Trump administration had essentially deleted the traditional talking points on democracy from the US lexicon. Pro-democracy NGOs and think-tanks still do their thing but their influence is negligible. Trying to remake the world in the Western image no longer seems to be a viable project. More importantly, the people and countries of the Arab world must be questioning whether it even is a desirable path to follow.

And for good reasons.

For any model of government to be appealing, it must be seen to work – that is, provide social stability, economic growth, basic services and rational decision-making. In recent years, the Western model

of government has brought us decision-making gridlock, ethno-nationalist and neo-fascist political parties, secessionist movements, disastrous referendum votes, unpopular heads of state and economies essentially managed by central bankers (because elected officials cannot make coherent decisions).

The West is rich; it can get away with incompetent and inefficient systems of government. The overall much less-rich Arab world, however, can be excused for not rushing to adopt the Western model of government. US President Donald Trump was wise to drop democracy-promotion, especially as he himself is an example of the crazy things that Western democracy can produce.

There is another model out there and one that is becoming increasingly attractive to people throughout the non-Western world. In a report by the Eurasia Group, a Washington-based consultancy, Ian Bremmer wrote that “China's political model, despite its domes-

tic challenges, is now perceived as stronger than it has ever been – and at a moment when the US political model is weakened.”

In response to those in Washington who continue to advocate for Western-style political reform, Bremmer said: “In terms of the legitimacy of government in the eyes of its citizens, the US may be in at least as great a need of structural political reform as China.”

Bremmer, who is president of the Eurasia Group and a professor at New York University, argued that one of the attractions of the China model is that Beijing does not force it on others: “That's attractive for governments that are used to Western demands for political and economic reform in exchange for financial help,” Bremmer wrote.

What is the China model? As Daniel A. Bell, dean of the School of Political Science at Shandong University and author of “The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy,” explained it: “China has evolved and implemented – in highly imperfect form – meritocratic mechanisms to select and promote political leaders with superior intellectual, social and moral qualities.”

This may not be done through one-person, one-vote elections but the result is an efficient and effective government.

Bell does not present China's political system as a utopia. He acknowledges its flaws, especially related to individual freedoms but he argues that, if China continues to “innovate and reform its system” while democracies “rest on their laurels and cast aspersions on political alternatives,” the Chinese model will become the globally dominant one.

Bremmer concluded: “Since 2008, we've seen a gradual erosion in global perceptions of the attractiveness of Western liberal democracies. There is now a viable alternative.”

Optimism versus pessimism in the Middle East

Claude Salhani

is a regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.



“Iran is not the only country where the Tehran regime is facing potential trouble.”

For many people, the celebration of the new year is a time for optimism; a rebirth and a chance of renewal amid high hopes for positive change. World leaders and the Roman Catholic pope often use this time to call for a better tomorrow.

In the Middle East, however, given conditions in many countries, the mood tends to be more pessimistic than optimistic.

Iranians ushered in the new year with anti-government protests, the largest since the major uprising in 2009. The demonstrations, many which turned violent, took the government by surprise.

The protests started over high rates of unemployment and rising cost of living but quickly expanded to include many other grievances the people have with the autocratic theocracy. These include demands for greater political freedom and less interference by the government in individual rights. One act of defiance to the regime in these latest protests saw young women

defy the strict dress code imposed on their sex and removed their headscarves.

This may not sound like much to a Western audience but in a conservative society ruled by the clergy punishment for such actions can be severe, especially if the government wants to set an example and frighten others from following suit.

Security forces responded with a heavy hand, with at least 21 deaths among the protesters. Authorities warned there would be “serious consequences” if the protests continued and dozens of people were arrested. US President Donald Trump tweeted: “The world is watching.”

So is Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who blamed the protests on “Iran's enemies.” The Iranian leader did not name those “enemies” but it is largely assumed he meant the United States (the Great Satan) and Israel (the Lesser Satan). In a follow-up tweet, Trump said the Iranian regime was “brutal and corrupt.” Trump added: “The people of Iran are finally acting

against the brutal Iranian regime.”

Iran is not the only country where the Iranian regime is facing potential trouble. The mullahs are involved in Iraq and in Syria, fighting in support of the regime of Bashar Assad. They are involved in Lebanon through their ties with Hezbollah and they are involved in Yemen, supporting an anti-Saudi militia in the country's civil war.

Iraq is reeling from the years of strife since the US invasion and subsequent occupation. Here, too, Iran is deeply involved in backing the Shias and interfering in the country's internal affairs.

Moving across the region, the situation in the Palestinian territories regressed in 2017 with Trump declaring that the United States would consider Jerusalem the capital of Israel, ordering the transfer of the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and igniting a few fires along the way as Palestinian youths took to the streets in protest.

Trump ignored the counsel of numerous world leaders, all of whom have far greater experience

and knowledge of the issue. All cautioned that such a decision should only be made in the context of negotiations for an overall settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Lebanon is once again caught up in a political storm with Hezbollah representing Iranian interests on one side and Prime Minister Saad Hariri standing up for Saudi Arabia's position.

In Egypt, the once serene Sinai is a place of strife where the Islamic State (ISIS) has found enough recruits to turn the area into an outpost of violence. The targeting of police officers and Egyptian military by ISIS followers has become a common occurrence.

The fighting in Yemen seems to have taken a turn for the worst with the pro-Iranian militia deploying missiles against Saudi Arabia.

Even the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, where life seemed sheltered, life is changing with the imposition of a value added tax on most goods. A reality check for everybody.

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