

Bush vision at odds with Arab allies

As Iraqis voted, Egypt was cracking down on political dissidents.

By Dan Murphy and Nicholas Blanford

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BAGHDAD AND BEIRUT - Shortly after Sunday's vote in Iraq, President Bush called Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdullah, and Jordan's King Abdullah. The purpose: to talk about ways to build on changes in Iraq. For Mr. Bush, the election is just the first step in his broader vision for the Middle East, one in which freedom and democracy will spread quickly.

But at just about the same time, Egypt was cracking down on political opponents of Mr. Mubarak. Saudi Arabia and Jordan recently arrested dissidents.

Herein lies Bush's problem, say analysts. While opinion polls show that most Arabs want free elections, some of democracy's biggest opponents are today's Arab leaders. It took foreign occupation to conduct these elections. So a key question remains: Will Iraq's vote stir democratic change throughout the region?

Chibli Mallat, professor of international law at Beirut's St. Joseph University, says if the election is followed by better security and the beginning of an American military withdrawal, it could put pressure on neighboring states.

"If chaos ensues [in Iraq], the momentary positive shock [of the elections] might disappear," he says. "But there's no doubt that if the elections hold to their promise of empowering people who use non-violent means to conduct their business and ... [Arabs see] the beginning of foreign troops departing, then it would be an extremely significant precedent, perhaps the most important in the last 50 years in the Arab world."

Iraq vote dazzled Arab world

To be sure, the sight of Iraqis lining up at polling stations dazzled the Arab world, since it brought home the disconnect between their leaders' statements and actions. While many Arab leaders have attacked the occupation of Iraq, that occupation made possible a vote that isn't allowed in most of the region's independent states.

Still, Arab analysts dismiss the notion that democracy can only prevail in the Arab world at the point of a Western gun. In fact, Arab feelings about developments in Iraq are deeply conflicted. With the election coming under a de facto US occupation that echoes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, some analysts argue that - paradoxically - the military occupation of Iraq is hindering the spread of democracy elsewhere in the region.

"What's retarding democracy in the rest of the Middle East is the resentment and opposition to the American military context in which this is happening," says Rami Khouri, a Jordanian political analyst. That's why, he says, foreign forces should start leaving Iraq soon.

"Sovereignty is the central requirement for genuine democracy," he says. "The elections do not constitute democracy. Sovereignty is going to be the criterion that will then allow us to determine if democracy takes root in Iraq and if it does, you will have impact elsewhere in the region."

In Syria, the only remaining Arab country under Baath Party rule, a halting process of reform has been under way for several years.

However, the Bush administration's vilification of that regime and demands that it change has seen some Syrians rally around the flag.

"Pressure for democracy is very much related to the feeling that there is no threat to the regime, because people still believe that the threats to a regime mean threats to the state and society as well," says Samir al-Taqi, a Syrian political analyst. "As long as the notion of regime change remains on the table, people are not giving democratic change the priority. Even though there is still enthusiasm for democracy."

Mr. Taqi also points to Iraq's chaos. Though the elections were a relative success, 35 voters were killed in election violence that day, and the war here shows no signs of being over. That chaos leaves many Arabs wary of too much change too soon.

In many countries in the region, the poor turnout of Sunni Arabs - the minority who have dominated Iraq's political classes since the state's formation - is seen as invalidating the whole process. Many Arab leaders, almost all of whom are Sunni, are fearful of what Jordan's King Abdullah has called a "Shiite crescent" extending from Iran through Iraq to their doorsteps.

Salah al-Din Hafez, a columnist for Egypt's government-owned Al Ahram daily, captured the mood of many Arabs, writing on Monday that "whatever the final outcome of the elections ... they lack legitimacy and credibility. First, because the elections took place under the supervision, control, and protection of a foreign occupation force, and second, because the majority of Sunnis boycotted the elections. Without the Sunnis, "the fate of Iraq cannot be decided nor can there be any talk of a legitimate government or a meaningful constitution," he wrote.

Challenge to Egypt's president

Just a day before Iraq's vote, Egypt arrested opposition politician and member of parliament Ayman Nour, who has called for constitutional reform that would set presidential term limits and a free election for president. Egypt says he faces two years in jail for forging documents in an application for his Al Ghad Party to win legal status.

Mr. Mubarak has been proclaimed president in an uncontested referendum every six years since 1980, and faces another such vote in the fall.

"Egypt isn't even remotely democratizing and Jordan isn't either," says Joshua Stacher, an Egypt expert at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. "There's a huge disconnect between [Bush's] freedom rhetoric and substantial policy change within these countries."

Though Nour's political party is small, he has won a surprising degree of support in the poor Bab al-Sharqeya district he represents and has been unusually bold in using the media to

attack the government. In 2003, Mr. Nour showed up an ally of President Mubarak's in a televised parliament meeting over the issue of the diminishing quality of government-subsidized bread for the poor. He brandished a piece of the bread and challenged the man to eat it.

Three other activists were arrested at the Cairo Book Fair on Friday. The three were distributing leaflets calling for Mubarak to step down at the end of his term and for the presidency to not be handed to his son Gamal Mubarak, who is currently viewed as the front-runner to succeed his father.