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*Edited by Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner,
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A RECORD OF FAILURE

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Mohamed Talbi is a Tunisian historian who has authored a number of books and articles on the history of the Maghreb. His publications include Iyal Allah (God's family), published in French translation in 1996 as Plaidoyer pour un Islam moderne. This essay originally appeared in the July 2000 issue of the Journal of Democracy and was translated from the French by Zerkex Spencer.

Everywhere today, democracy is proving contagious. It may be spreading faster in some regions than in others, but it is spreading. Even in Serbia and even in China. Everywhere except in the Arab world. This calls for reflection and at least an attempt at explanation. If the criterion of a democracy is the turnover of political power by peaceful means, that is, by elections considered free, fair, perfectly transparent, and indisputably and irrefutably incontestable—in a word, honest—then not a single Arab country is democratic today. Lebanon, which paid a heavy price for its civil war (1976–91), is a special case. It is still too early to draw any conclusions from the apparently free elections that took place in Kuwait in June 1999 (especially if one considers previous failures), and the Algerian elections of 1999 were disappointing.

A leader who gains power by taking the life of his predecessor, and in doing so runs the risk of having his own life taken, lets go of power only when he in turn is eliminated. He stops short of no crime in order to cling to power (and to life) for as long as possible. This is the classic scenario in Arab countries today, not of alternation in power but of succession through violent death or, in the best of cases, death by natural causes. It is that simple. Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, who had deposed King Farouk I in 1952, escaped several assassination attempts and ended up dying in his bed in 1970, adored by his people. His successor, Anwar Sadat (1970–81), was not so lucky. If Hosni Mubarak, who succeeded Sadat, is still alive, it is not for want of zeal on the part of his adversaries. On 26 June 1995, they barely missed killing him at

the airport in Addis Ababa, where he was on his way to attend a summit of the Organization of African Unity. At the end of August 1999, he escaped a third amateur assassination attempt, this time by knifepoint, at Port Said in Egypt. By resorting to repression and tight security—very tight if necessary, with two or more police officers stationed every 100 meters along the route to public appearances and with metal detectors set up at the entrance to meeting places—and by resorting to crimes as well, one who deposes or kills in order to take power may be fortunate enough to die of natural causes. Luck also plays its part. That was the case with the late King Hassan II of Morocco who, on two occasions, miraculously survived well-planned assassination attempts—the first on 10 July 1971, when 200 people lost their lives at the Skhirat Palace near Rabat, and the second the following year, when his royal Boeing aircraft, fired upon and seriously damaged in an attack by six Moroccan soldiers, succeeded in landing without loss of human life.

The seizure of power, particularly by assassination, inevitably creates a vicious circle that leaves no room for any other alternative, much less for alternation of power. The system is not angelic and it is not run by choir boys. Moreover, it is old—very old—in the Arab world. It is a tradition. In the history of the Arab-Muslim world, “Oriental despotism” (the term is Montesquieu’s) has always had its own ruthless and bloody logic. One might respond that this same model can be found throughout human history. Yes, of course, but with this difference: Wherever democracy has taken root, the battlefield has been displaced as the arena for gaining power. The clash of arms has given way to the verdict of the ballot box. One might reply that the Arab world is not lacking in ballot boxes. I would agree. I would even add that they are not only numerous but also very well stuffed. And that is precisely where the difference lies.

In some parts of the Arab world, democracy simply doesn’t exist—because, in the eyes of Islamic radicalism, it is incompatible with Islam: “There is no power other than God’s.” This is clear and unambiguous. Saudi Arabia’s constitution is the Koran. Elsewhere in the Arab world, democracy is indeed in the constitution.¹ In such cases, things are much less clear and very ambiguous. For there is a huge gap between theory and practice. In virtually all Arab states, democracy in practice is no more than a theatrical production. We are actors in a democratic play, with all the stage settings and all the Western words that the play demands, including the suspense that surrounds the counting of the votes. Western newspapers speak of fairs and carnivals, and they are not wrong. As a matter of fact, elections in the Arab world are nothing but a bad joke, a farce, an immense masquerade, after which the stuffing of the ballot boxes begins behind closed doors. All the Arab democracies are characterized by surreal and absurd vote totals for the ruler, whoever he may be. Except in really exceptional cases, like the recent elections in Algeria, the passing grade always lies above 99 percent.

These percentages are not, as one might believe, the result of naiveté, and still less of political blunders. They are carefully calculated. As in all fascist states based on sham elections, these deliberately absurd and intentionally ridiculous percentages serve a specific purpose. In the first place, the regimes are able to discredit and dishonor the intelligentsia by making them swallow these sham results and even publicly affirm them. Thus the backbones of the intellectuals are softened beyond all limits. They are neutralized, rendered servile, and if need be, compromised by being induced to partake of the dubious but irresistible benefits of power.

All the Arab countries have seen, to varying degrees, huge fortunes amassed in the shadows of power. Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) had already made this observation. Corruption and dictatorship go hand in hand. Not that corruption is always necessary, by the way. All it takes is to offer promotions, the highest-ranking and best-paid positions, foreign diplomatic posts, cars, honors, awards, even taxi licenses, to the most deserving and unconditionally devoted—all the privileges that can be withheld or withdrawn from the rest for their lack of zeal and then redistributed. All the Arab authors of *Nasihah al-Muluk* (Counsel for kings) insisted on the perpetual need for the king to have something to give, to withdraw, or, if need be, to confiscate, in order to keep a tight rein on his world.

The Freedom To Shut Up

Invited by Robert Badinter to attend the commemorative ceremonies of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 7–10 December 1998, I was able to bear witness to the bad publicity Tunisia was getting in the area of human rights. Morocco, which had made serious efforts in this field, was among the states represented by its prime minister, who had the honor of delivering an address from the podium. Representatives from Tunisia were very few, as the state had confiscated the passports of its most credible human rights activists. Assigned to prominent (and empty) seats, they were conspicuous by their absence. Tunisia could not have made a worse decision. The result? The two states singled out for their grave human rights abuses were Algeria and Tunisia.

Returning to Tunis, I witnessed quite a change in tone and setting. The event was celebrated with great caution. The High Committee for Human Rights and Basic Liberties, a governmental body of which I am a member, chose as its venue for the celebration a small room in a hotel and did not spend much on publicity. Most of the committee members did not bother to attend. Before a small crowd of no more than 20 people, the opening speaker traced the history of human rights, going very far back into the past. The next speech, a highly abstract sociophilosophical presentation, was delivered by a well-known sociologist and respected academic who had always (alongside his teaching job) held senior administrative positions in Tunisia or served as a Tunisian delegate to

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international bodies. There were only mid-level officials in the room. A young academic who also served in some cultural post within the ruling party seized the opportunity to distinguish himself. "What you are saying is all very well," he said, putting his foot in it, "but tell us what happened to human rights in Tunisia after the 'blessed turn'?" (This expression is used to refer to the deposing of President Habib Bourguiba in 1987 by his prime minister Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who succeeded him as president.) There was no way to sidestep the issue. The speaker was forced to extol the virtues of the government. With an appropriately solemn tone of voice, he declared: "In all its history, Tunisia has never enjoyed so much liberty and respect for human rights." Thus was said what had to be said. End of discussion. The meeting could have come to an end there and then, and it did. As we left, the young academic turned to me and said: "You're the one who taught us to be critical!" There are moments when one regrets having been a teacher. I do not know what followed. I never went back.

Dishonored, discredited, and compromised, Tunisia's intelligentsia has been domesticated and, at the slightest divergence of opinion, disposed of. Brains are thus weakened, emptied of all principles, of all thought, of all desire for thought. Bodies are stripped of their bones to the point where human beings are reduced to invertebrates crawling before their master. As for intellectuals who remain defiant, they are, in the best of cases, left with but one freedom: the freedom to shut up. In the name of "encouraging" culture, the state has set up several governmental organs, all of which, operating under different designations, play the role of a Holy Office for Mental Purity. All that is heard, seen, read, and written within the country is tightly controlled and filtered.

I can offer some examples from my own relatively privileged experience as a writer and academic. My two books published by Cérès (Tunis), *Iyal Allah* (God's family) and *Umat al-Wasat* (The median community), were first banned and then, after the intervention of the publisher (who had directed Ben Ali's first presidential campaign), were finally granted publication. The first book brought me three pages of invective in *Al-Sahafa*, where I had already been labeled a fundamentalist (the most serious accusation in Tunisia), an opportunist, and finally, a traitor. I was immediately relieved of my duties as president of the National Cultural Committee. The author of the pages in question then found himself entrusted with the duties of director of publications and copyright registration in the Ministry of the Interior. Nothing enters the country or gets published without his authorization. I had to approach him on 30 March 1999 to obtain clearance from Customs to release Tariq Ramadan's book, *Aux sources du renouveau musulman* in Tunisia. It was not the first time. Nothing escaped the vigilance of the department that he directed—he has since been transferred—not even erudite university theses. One such thesis, on the topic of *rida* (apostasy) in Islam

(not exactly a dangerous subject for the state), was defended under my chairmanship and awarded highest honors but was never allowed to be published in Tunisia. It appeared in abridged form and under a different title in Morocco. My ten-year-old request to publish, in collaboration with university colleagues, a journal called *Al-Maqasid*, aimed at contributing to a renewal of Muslim thought, has remained unanswered.

On 24 February 1999, I received an invitation from the Tunis-based ALESCO, the Arab UNESCO, to contribute to an encyclopedia of Arab and Muslim men of learning. At the bottom of the registration form were the words: "To secure your participation, is it necessary to gain prior permission from your government, or from any other authority? If so, to what department and at what address must the request be directed?" It is as if a French academic, invited by UNESCO to write a biographical entry on Du Bellay, Ronsard, or Thomas More for the *Encyclopædia Universalis*, first had to obtain authorization from Jacques Chirac, Lionel Jospin, or another authority, who could only be the minister of the interior. In their eagerness to hunt down all free thought, Arab countries fear no ridicule whatsoever. They have undeniably become masters in this field, who can proclaim, without feigned indignation, that they really have "no lessons to learn from anyone." I returned the form with this simple note: "Thank you for your offer. I find in it an eloquent indication of the extent of a researcher's freedom in the Arab world." Arab countries do not allow freedom of thought. How can they allow true democracy, which respects human dignity and human rights? Where necessary, their surveillance spares neither the telephone nor the mail, neither the fax nor the Internet. That is the sad truth to which we must resign ourselves.

Information Is the Enemy

As for what comes from abroad, the censors do their best within the limits of technology. And Arab countries are all experts in this field. We would be more than willing to share the optimism of David Gardner, who writes in the *Financial Times*: "The Arab powers will lose their battle against the Internet, for the ways of evading censorship are evolving very rapidly."² For the moment, however, it is censorship that is winning and that brings in money, for it is in good hands and it pays well. Today, it is Saudi Arabia—the property of the Al-Saoud family—that has "the most ambitious plan in the region to block the flow of undesirable information," notes Human Rights Watch. Saudi Arabia also relies upon limiting the number of its Internet subscribers, who constitute less than one percent of the population. Other countries are even stricter. Iraq and Libya are simply not connected to the World Wide Web. Syria, which had been connected, subsequently blocked access to it. Bahrain, whose economy relies on communications, has recourse to standard methods of surveillance. That is the case with Tunisia as well. Yet we are assured that the

methods of evading censorship are evolving faster than the technology of controlling information. This is a race that the leaders of the Arab world will make every effort to win. For them, information is the enemy.

The leaders of the Arab countries cannot take freedom of information lightly. Democracy is ruinous. Nelson Mandela is poor, and the poet Leopold Senghor lives in the clouds. The presidency of South Africa and of Senegal, respectively, have left them with nothing for their old age. What improvidence! While democrats fail to get rich because democracy requires working under the bright light of day, dictators amass huge fortunes because their system allows them to work under cover of darkness. Thus the choice of all the Arab leaders. The historical model will no doubt remain that of President Mobutu of Zaire (1960–61 and 1965–96), which makes him worth recalling. Mobutu was a master of the field who knew how to strike a fine balance between his personal fortune, discreetly concealed in the West, and the foreign debt of his country. He had seized power in a putsch and he was ousted from power in a putsch by Laurent Désiré Kabila. While Mobutu may not have carried his treasures with him to heaven—or rather, to hell—he nonetheless remains to his fellow dictators an exemplar of foresight and know-how, thanks to his infallible system of control over information and all forms of expression of which democracy is capable and culpable.

In Iraq, we find a deadlier version of the same scenario. It would not be good for Iraqis, dying today of sickness and hunger after seeing hundreds of thousands die on the battlefields, to find out that the personal fortune of their president, Saddam Hussein, in power since 1979, amounts to \$6 billion, all in unfrozen foreign assets, as far as we can tell. This news would surely be of little consolation to them. It might even trouble them greatly. Hence the absolute imperative of controlling information. Too bad! The advantages of the Internet to the economy are sacrificed, despite the knowledge that this adds to the misery of an already sufficiently miserable people. On all fronts, democracy runs counter to the ruler's own interests. Thus it must be burned at the altar of the cult of the leader and served up as offerings, for which the ruler has a voracious appetite and without which his anger would rival that of the gods. He also has his own hell to punish the ungrateful. The Orient has its traditions.

In May 1999, *Forbes* magazine published a list of the ten wealthiest heads of state in the world. It included the Sultan of Brunei (1st), Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands (7th), and Queen Elizabeth II (10th). The remaining seven largest fortunes were owned by Arab rulers, all of whom govern poor countries. The list is presented, without further comment, in the Table on the facing page.

With the drop in the price of oil—which no longer exercises the same constraints on the world economy thanks to the discovery of new oil deposits and new sources of energy—Saudi Arabia is beginning to face financial difficulties and even to go into debt. Yet its king continues to

TABLE—THE WORLD'S WEALTHIEST HEADS-OF-STATE

RANK	NAME	COUNTRY	FORTUNE (in billions of \$)	IN POWER SINCE
1	SULTAN HASSANAL BOLKIAH	Brunei	30.0	1967
2	KING FAHD	Saudi Arabia	28.0	1982
3	SHEIKH ZAYED IBN SULTAN	Abu Dhabi	20.0	1966
4	PRINCE JABER	Kuwait	17.0	1977
5	SHEIKH MAKHTOUM	Dubai	12.0	1990
6	SADDAM HUSSEIN	Iraq	6.0	1979
7	QUEEN BEATRIX	The Netherlands	5.2	1980
8	PRINCE HAMAD	Qatar	5.0	1995
9	PRESIDENT HAFIZ AL-ASSAD	Syria	2.0	1971
10	QUEEN ELIZABETH II	United Kingdom	0.45*	1952

Source: *Forbes*, May 1999.

*This figure is higher (\$16 billion) when the Royal Collection, with the crown jewels, is included.

live with the same ostentation as in *One Thousand and One Nights*. The French magazine *Jeune Afrique* describes what a stir his arrival last year caused at his Marbella Palace in Spain, which he had not visited in 12 years: "Two hundred tons of luggage, 25 Rolls Royces and other luxury vehicles, 400 servants, cabinet ministers (including the minister of health—the king is 78 years old and diabetic), the renting of 250 suites and deluxe rooms in the hotels of the Coast. . . . The people in his entourage spend lots of money: 120,000 French francs per day in the large department stores alone, which are opened at night especially for them."³ What? A proper fairy tale in the true Oriental tradition, one that does not fall short of the legendary munificence of Harun al-Rashid . . . but with infinitely less power and historical weight.

Corruption and the Rule of Law

In an interview reported in the French weekly *Le Point*, Jean-Michel Foulquier reminds us that "corruption gave rise to Islamism in Arabia and in Algeria."⁴ We too often forget this! One need only add: not just in Arabia and Algeria. It is true, however, that Saudi Arabia remains an unsurpassable model. Whereas France devotes 4 percent of its GDP to the military, Saudi Arabia devotes 30 percent. Why? Is the country so threatened? Its neighbors and Israel are nothing but *alibis*. All events prove it. No, the secret lies elsewhere. Arms purchases are lucrative for "the royal family, which receives, for every contract, 30–40 percent in commissions." Too bad if the "number of combat planes already greatly exceeds the number of qualified pilots available!"⁵ For combat, there are the Americans, who, as everyone knows, do not work for nothing—which of course increases the bill. But the royal family must feed itself, and it must feed its 6,000 princes. This is not *baqshish* (bribery) or small-scale corruption. It is not a petty theft that deserves, as a just and heavenly punishment, the amputation of the hand. This is High Art, for which the jesuitism of the well-paid Grand *Faqihs* (Guardians) of the Kingdom

will find proper *fatwas* that render all dissidence punishable under Holy Law.

All Arab dictators maintain that the law—whether it be Islamic law (*shari'a*) or civil law—is on their side. They all claim to adhere to the “rule of law.” If that is what they want to say, fine. But one must know what law and what justice? After all the observations that we have made, it may at first seem surprising to note the absence of protests and the chorus of praise that accompany each electoral exercise and its obviously absurd results. To understand, one must have read George Orwell’s famous novels *Animal Farm* and especially *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The English novelist’s predictions were mistaken only in terms of geography. Big Brother is indeed governing in the Arab “democracies,” which, according to the irrefutable slogan, have “no lessons to learn from anyone.” A very sophisticated police force, well staffed with law-enforcement officers, ensures that order reigns. A vigilant justice system pursues and severely punishes acts of defamation and anything else that may disrupt public order. And in the absence of convincing evidence to the contrary—evidence that is, moreover, impossible to furnish—all protests are acts of defamation inherently prone to disrupting public order. The punishments provided by law can greatly exceed ten years of incarceration in conditions that, according to countless corroborating testimonies, would make anyone shudder. To protest under such conditions, one must be a candidate for martyrdom. And I have not even mentioned the parallel processes that provide a still more powerful and effective deterrent: disappearance, abduction, torture to the point of death, the destruction of goods, and all kinds of troubles that render daily life unlivable.

Today, the Arab world has captured the sad prize, previously held by Latin America, for cruel treatment of all kinds. One has merely to consult the publications of the specialized international organizations—Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Actualité-International, Reporters Sans Frontières, and the United Nations—to see how scathing they all are regarding the Arab countries. There is also a whole body of literature available to those seeking more information. Some examples include: Jean-Michel Foulquier (France’s former ambassador to Riyadh), *Arabie Saoudite, La Dictature protégée*; Gilles Perrault, *Notre ami le roi* (Hassan II of Morocco); Ahmad Manaï, *Le Jardin secret du général Ben Ali* (the president of Tunisia); and Pierre Guingam, *Hafez El Asad et le parti Baât en Syrie*. There is also the journal *Conscience et liberté*. Yet who could ever calculate and tally all the deaths in the prisons of Syria? Who could ever count the victims of Iraq’s “campaign to cleanse prisons” by murder or the victims of its war waged with chemical weapons against the Kurds in 1988? The Algerian Movement of Free Officers (MAOL), founded in 1997, maintains that, from 1992 to 1998, the Algerian civil war claimed 173,000 lives, including 25,000 to 26,000 members of the security forces. On 18 August 1999, the MAOL urged

the families of the disappeared to file a lawsuit against those responsible for the tragedy, starting with the generals.⁶

Applauding the Leader

When one considers the great lengths to which Arab leaders go to quash the spirit of freedom of their people, the latter's apparent lack of protest no longer seems so surprising and becomes easier to understand and explain. Today, the Arab countries are the world leader in the industry of repression, ranging from disinformation to the use of poison gas. Operated with perfect know-how and with an energy that leaves no room for scruples, it turns the masses into puppets, a development that is unique to Arab countries and is visible on television to all observers. It is more than just lethargy: Arab dictators have succeeded in hypnotizing their people.

Everyone applauds the leader. There is not even any need to press a button anymore. Worshipping one's leader has become a conditioned reflex, reminiscent of Pavlov's dog: The leader's appearance always triggers thunderous applause. The most zealous vow to sacrifice their blood for him and shriek their undying loyalty until their voices are hoarse and their bodies exhausted. It is not uncommon to see some of them contorting themselves as if in an enraptured dance. It is a gripping spectacle, greatly enjoyed by the leader, whose passage through the crowds has the effect of a huge collective brainwashing. Bourguiba had become a master of this art. Now we are better able to understand how the system works and endures. We also understand why the leader of an "Arab democracy," who has invariably assumed power through a putsch—deposing or taking the life of his predecessor—or by rigging the system, does not become a criticizable swine until his successor has, in turn, eliminated him. *Ut fata trahunt!* As fate determines! Some may think that is a reference to the "fatalism" of Islam, but the proverb is Latin.

Has anything actually changed for the Arab masses since they gained their independence? They are told that they are now citizens. *Muwatinun la Ra'aya* (Citizens, not subjects) was the title of a book that caused quite a stir in the Arab world in the middle of the twentieth century. But the Arabs have never been citizens. They have had neither the time nor the opportunity. Subjected to corrupt, perverted, and crumbling powers, they became colonized natives, and they now find themselves subjects again, even if they are pompously called citizens to create an illusion of modernity. They are still led by the *Asa al ta'a* (the stick of obedience), about which Ibn Khaldun wrote such illuminating accounts that they scarcely seem to have aged a day. Today, the *Asa al ta'a* has taken the form of more effective tools in the hands of the police, but that is where modernity stops. With the stick, and with all the many other kinds of tools that modern technology offers, the so-called citizens of the Arab world are driven down uncertain, hazardous paths not of their own choosing, paths

that draw them into disastrous wars (Israel or Iran), inter-Arab conflicts (Saudi Arabia–Yemen–Egypt, Iraq–Kuwait, Algeria–Morocco–Mauritania–Polisario), or civil wars (North Yemen–South Yemen, the Lebanese–Syrian imbroglio, Sudan, Algeria). The crowning moment, disastrous for all the Arabs, was the Gulf War—that masterpiece of stupidity triggered by Saddam Hussein, who was nonetheless a “good dictator,” greatly prized by the United States for services rendered against Iranian Islamism. His pigheadedness until almost the very end was so absurd that it is hard not to think that he had been manipulated by the CIA, as many believe.

As for economic development, what can one say? There is famine in Sudan, that potentially rich breadbasket that could feed the entire Arab world and beyond. Overall, Arab countries depend on the rest of the world for their food. Their wealth lies abroad, largely frozen in property holdings. They export workers and import unemployment. Those Arabs with money invest it first and foremost in the West, and sparingly in the Arab world, for the latter is considered altogether less stable and less profitable. Arab dictators embrace each other heartily and distrust each other even more heartily. When circumstances change, the leaders are often unpredictable, which makes their commitments hollow and often without result. The consequences for development are fatal.

Nevertheless, the balance sheet is not altogether negative. None of the Arab countries are bankrupt, and there are some successes. The differences one encounters from one country to the next are sometimes enormous. Yet there remains a yawning gulf between what could have been done by people exercising democratic control over their lives and what has in fact been done by alienating, degrading, corrupt, and corrupting dictatorships. There is nothing in the initially far richer Arab countries to remind one of South Korea—a country that, at a critical juncture in the middle of the twentieth century, chose democracy and knew how to achieve it. It would be difficult, I believe, to dispute this assessment. Yet the Arab peoples, having been thoroughly subjugated, continue frantically to applaud.

NOTES

1. See *Dustur*, in *L'Encyclopédie de l'Islam II*, 655–94; Abdefattah Amor, *Constitution et religion dans les États musulmans*; “L’Etat musulman, Conscience et liberté” in *Conscience et liberté I* 54 (1997): 55–69; “La Nature de l’Etat: L’Organisation de l’Etat,” in *Conscience et liberté II* 55 (1998): 122–41; “La Législation et la politique de l’Etat” in *Conscience et liberté III* 56 (1998): 15–30.

2. David Gardner, *Financial Times*, repr. in *Jeune Afrique* (Paris), 20–26 July 1999, 30.

3. *Jeune Afrique* (Paris), 17–30 August 1999, 87.

4. Jean-Michel Foulquier, *Le Point* (Paris), 4 February 1995, 34.

5. Alain Gresh, *Le Monde diplomatique* (Paris), August 1995, 9.

6. *Le Monde*, 20 August 1999, 34.