

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Movements of Change ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Marwan Barghout's candidacy in the upcoming Palestinian elections is partly about whether Palestinians voters will be offered a real choice or what passes for an 'election' in Cairo or Damascus. But the January 9 election also touches on a broader issue, one that has been on the region's agenda for several years: generational change, and how the United States plans to cope with it.

I turned 41 earlier this month. Yet, to an extent unimaginable in any other region of the world the Middle East remains dominated by many of the same men (and they are all men) who ran the region when I was in high school. I'm not just talking about the Arabs here. Ariel Sharon and Shimon Peres have been key figures in Middle Eastern politics even longer than Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah and Sultan Qaboos of Oman. Recently in London I had coffee with a friend, a journalist who has been in and out of the region since the mid-60s. He told me he'd like to get out of Britain and back into the field again, but that this time he was looking at postings outside the Middle East. "The same people arguing over the same things for the last 30 years," he said. "I think it's time for me to look somewhere else. The Middle East is just too depressing. Nothing ever changes."

Of course that is a bit of an exaggeration. But only a bit. The Middle East began a slow process of generational change nearly a decade ago: the long-established rulers of Morocco, Bahrain and Jordan died, passing the throne to younger, more vigorous sons with western educations and a broader experience of the world. The emir of Qatar ousted his father in a bloodless coup. Those countries are all monarchies. Syria is a republic but you would not have known it to watch Hafez Al-Assad's careful grooming of his son Bashar over a period of years, followed by Bashar's immediate ascent to the presidency following his father's death. Libya's Mummar Qadhafi and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak have given more than a few signs that they plan to follow Hafez Assad's lead in passing the presidency to a favored son (Saddam Hussein, before his ouster, was clearly planning a similar sort of 'transition').

Which brings us back to Abu Mazen, Marwan Barghout and next month's Palestinian elections. Pretty much every Arab country has a parliament, and some of these parliaments are filled through real, reasonably fair elections. But never have an Arab people had a chance to choose their leader in a real, open, contested vote. Ironically Yasser Arafat, by dying, may wind up providing the region with a real-world example of what elections can be – exactly the sort of thing the more ambitious neo-cons were hoping would happen in Iraq.

In addition to being slow, generational change has proven to be a mixed blessing for many in the region. Neither Morocco nor Syria has changed all that much under their new, younger leaders. Bahrain got its parliament back, but the accompanying gerrymandering (designed to keep the country's Sunni Muslim minority in power and guarantee the royal family's primacy) has caused almost as many problems as the voting solved. Qatar and Jordan have seen

some promising moves toward more political openness, all of which are, ultimately, dependent on the whim of the monarch.

Change is good. But it has been a long time coming, and remains more of a hope than a reality.

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