

The West Should Focus on North Africa

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For North Africa, 2009 is a year of elections. Regrettably, these elections -- this week's presidential elections in Algeria, Tunisia's presidential and legislative elections in October, and Morocco's local council elections in June -- attest not to the vibrancy of democracy in the region, but rather to its lingering authoritarianism.

Although Washington has found solid counter terrorism partners in North Africa, a short-term focus on security is potentially harmful. These countries face myriad challenges which necessitate a broad, long-term focus on reform. Doing so will serve not only the people of North Africa, but also the strategic interests of the US and its allies.

This week, Algeria's president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, will compete for a third term in office. Unlike in 2004, Mr. Bouteflika will run virtually uncontested. The opposition is boycotting because, according to two-time presidential contender Said Saadi, the elections are a "nihilistic folly." Indeed, Bouteflika is only able to run because he engineered a constitutional amendment abolishing term limits.

Of course, for Algerians, these elections are just a formality. As Algerians know, elections are predetermined not by the people, but by "le pouvoir" -- the power of the shadowy tripartite of the army, the intelligence services, and Bouteflika's clan.

Algeria's political stagnation is combined with high unemployment rates, a burgeoning population of young people, rises in the cost of living, and rampant corruption. This has contributed to a volatile cocktail of instability and fomented resentment among the younger sectors of the population. A bitter frustration with the system has resulted in mass illegal immigration to Europe, increasing clashes between rioters and government forces, and the presence of local jihadis linked to Al Qaeda, namely Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Disturbingly, the Algerian experience appears to be echoing across North Africa.

In Tunisia, where elections are slated for the fall, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's political style remains highly authoritarian. The US State Department 2008 Human Rights Report, for example, expressed dismay at the "severe restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association" reflected in Mr. Ben Ali's approval ratings.

Even in Morocco, where King Mohammad VI has some popular legitimacy, record lows in voter turnouts in 2007 suggest increased apathy and disillusionment with the voting process.

Both Tunisia and Morocco have been the target of jihadi attacks in recent years. Although Tunisia performs well economically, there are indications of an increasingly conducive environment for recruitment into AQIM -- which

has been trying to develop a presence across North Africa. Indeed, US National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair recently noted that AQIM "represents a significant threat to US and Western interests."

The explosive combination of political repression and a dearth of economic opportunity has fueled fears of long-term instability in North Africa. These concerns are exacerbated by an aging leadership and uncertain succession mechanisms. While the departure of Ben Ali and Bouteflika may not be imminent, in the absence of legitimate institutions, successors will enter their offices with even less credibility and historical legitimacy, potentially fueling further disaffection.

This may prove to be a problem for the US, which has serious business interests in the Maghreb. Although the US created a country assistance strategy plan for Morocco which focuses on "mitigating drivers of youth disaffection" and will bestow \$110 million on the country in 2009, it lacks such a long-sighted approach with Algeria and Tunisia. In those two countries, despite the Bush administration's "democracy agenda," little real benefit or US commitment to reform has been perceived.

In these countries, the US must take concrete measures to promote human rights and reform. In conjunction with European partners, a far more detailed and extensive program of scholarships, technical expertise assistance, civic education, English language programs, and other development programs should be offered to Tunisia and Algeria. Such efforts must be teamed with further impetus on economic regional cooperation and forward movement on the Western Sahara conflict.

It is now time for a policy that takes into account the region's stability issues and makes all of North Africa into a development partner, rather than a potential time bomb, and ensures that having an election season actually means something.

Dana Moss is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute, and focuses on Libya and North Africa. ❖

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