

How to Boost Middle East Democracy

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

If there is one thing that the Bush administration and its critics agree on, it is that we can not win the war on terror only through military means. So long as the greater Middle East is a cauldron of anger, resentment, alienation and frustration'characterized by conflict and corrupt regimes'radical Islamists will have fertile grounds on which to recruit new terrorists.

For President Bush, the long-term answer to competing with the radical Islamists is democracy promotion. But what happens in the short term when elections are held and the Islamists win? Does the Hamas victory in the vote for the Palestine Legislative Council and the successes of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian parliamentary elections threaten the long-term hopes for democracy by electing anti-democrats in the near-term?

Inevitably, we face these questions because in much of the Arab world today only two alternatives exist: either a corrupt regime that benefits the leader, his family and cronies, or Islamists who are not corrupt and often deliver social services while using the mosque to recruit new followers to their fight against modernity. In such circumstances, it should come as no surprise that Islamists do well when elections are held.

But we need not despair and give up on democracy promotion. In traveling throughout the Middle East in preparing a television special on democracy in the Arab world, I discovered there is a third way. Reformers in the Arab world are doing their own soul searching. They realize that they must also change and become less focused on offering an abstract message of reform. Instead they must become more oriented toward organizing at the grass-roots level and delivering services, not just rhetoric.

Though a liberal alternative won't materialize overnight, seven guidelines should shape U.S. policy toward democracy promotion in the Arab world:

- Elections are part of the process, but should not come first. Given the current environment, we should not be pushing for early elections; we should focus instead on helping secular, moderate alternatives to organize and emphasize fighting corruption and developing the rule of law and good governance in the near term.
- There should be eligibility requirements when elections are held. Militias and their members should not be allowed to run as parties or to field candidates. It is either ballots or bullets but not both, and potential candidates must make

a choice.

- Reformers should help us frame our public message and posture in the area. On a country by country basis, we should identify credible reformers and let them advise us on how to address Arab publics; our goal is to help and not hurt them, and they are better arbiters of what will resonate locally.

- U.S. and donor aid should be geared toward helping reformers provide services and programs. We need to take a page from the Islamist play-book. They have used the social-services provision to build a following. Reformers should now do the same; we could help fund such programs. For example, reformer-led after-school programs that teach English and computer skills would be a magnet for many Arab parents and kids and put reformers in a position of responding to real needs and offering hope.

- Donor assistance must also be geared toward helping reforming governments become efficient. Reforming governments in the region like Jordan and Morocco need to build models of success. They need to deliver, and we and others should target our assistance toward programs that help them provide services in impoverished areas where recruiting in the mosques is greatest and the governments have been traditionally unresponsive.

- Reformers must know they are not alone and we will work to protect them. Too often reformers have been pressured and arrested by regimes, including those that are friendly to the United States. We cannot be seen as advocating democracy toward our enemies but never against our friends. When Egypt arrests Ayman Nour who ran against President Mubarak, or the Saudis arrest leading reformers (as they have), there needs to be a public consequence. Both reformers and regimes must know that repression not yield silence.

- Emphasize the importance of free media and its access. While much of the new media in the Middle East is populist in its appeal, there are outlets like al-Arabiya that are trying hard to be responsible and create accountability among regimes who have traditionally controlled the press as government mouthpieces. There will be no democracy in the Arab world without free media that can act as a watchdog, and we must continue to emphasize access as a central theme.

Democracy can neither be imposed nor appear magically over night in the Arab world. The same is true for secular, moderate alternatives to the autocratic regimes and their theocratic rivals. But working to promote democracy is the right course, and there are practical steps that we can take now to move us down the right path and help our natural partners in the region.

Dennis Ross, former U.S. envoy to the Middle East, is distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The Battle for Arab Democracy, which he helped produce, aired this weekend on the Fox News Channel. ❖

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