



CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ARAB CULTURAL SITUATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE DEVELOPMENT REPORTS

Salah Eddin al Jorshi ●

The human development reports on the Arab world represent some of the most important contemporary literature on the Arab cultural situation and they continue to spark extensive debate in official, academic and political circles. They are also taken seriously by all those international bodies and organisations that have an interest in this sensitive and vital region.

Although experts from various Arab states are involved in setting the parameters for these reports and deciding on their wording and the approach they should adopt, most governments – as well as the majority of opposition or independent groups – see them as “echoing Western methodologies and concepts”, while their authors endeavour to lay the responsibility for their contents on the historical, cultural and social environments of the countries concerned. Despite the criticisms, however – and even though the Arab revolutions have begun a trend which is causing them

● Researcher from Tunisia.



to be reassessed – these reports have become a powerful tool in the hands of oppositions and local and regional civil society organisations as they attempt to prove the failures of official policies and intensify the crisis of confidence in the legitimacy of the ruling regimes,.

“The Arab report of ill repute”?

The first global human development report was issued in 1990. Its pivotal element was a call for a review of the economic discourse which had dominated the international scene since the end of the Second World War – an aim which was “as ambitious as it was simple and had far-reaching consequences. Income should no longer be used as an indicator for determining a people’s prosperity in the long term and the emphasis should in future be placed on development by the people and for the people, while the ultimate goals of development would be ‘choices and freedoms’.” It was on this basis that the first three reports on Arab human development (2002-2005) considered the Arab region to be suffering from serious shortcomings in three areas: “knowledge, freedom and women’s empowerment”.

The 2003 report, entitled “Building a Knowledge Society”, went into some detail about the region’s critical level of “knowledge poverty” which it saw as being to a significant extent linked to political factors – politics being (in the view of the people who produced the report) “the last frame of reference, and perhaps the one with the greatest impact when analysing the features of knowledge acquisition in the Arab countries”. However, it was the report “Towards Freedom in the Arab Nation”, published in 2004, that caused a greater storm; indeed, some official Arab political circles described it as “the report of ill repute”. There were two reasons for this.

Firstly, it was unusually bold in its discussion of political conditions in the Arab states. It spoke frankly and directly about the serious lack of freedoms in the region, as well as the severe consequences that could arise as a result, and included an anatomical assessment of the political situation in the light of the Arab governments’ commitments to introduce political reforms.

The second thing that upset the region's governments was the attitude of the George W Bush Administration following the events of 11th September 2001, when it used the report's contents – particularly its negative assessment of the level of freedom in the Arab world – to justify its political attacks on the Arab regimes and the launch of its initiative known as the Greater Middle East Project. This was a project that held various Arab regimes responsible for “incubating terrorism” and believed that the way to deal with the problem was by putting pressure on those who had hitherto been America's allies to democratise their systems of government and introduce political reforms in their countries. Subsequently, whenever the regimes concerned tried to defend themselves and the way they handled their domestic affairs, they were referred to the contents of the human development report, which (thanks to local and international developments) had now risen to the top of the “reform literature list” and become a major source of material for debates on the region and its future.

As suspicion finds its mark, the seeds of conflict begin to germinate

The fact that the 2004 report was published at more or less the same time as the change in American policy towards its Arab allies has led some people to wonder about the “backgrounds and motives” of the parties behind this “coincidence”. According to the Lebanese writer Faisal Jalloul: “It was not just by chance that the United Nations report focused on the statement that the Arabs are poor despite possessing considerable resources, and that it called for the oil revenues to be invested in the Arab world and Arab human development. The publication of the report also occurred at precisely the time when the West was putting forward the idea that terrorism had deep roots among the Arab and Muslim poor, and that therefore in order to eradicate terrorism it would be necessary to dry up the springs which feed it, the main one being poverty.” In this writer's view, the report's main function was to “confront the two phenomena together: that is to say, the way the oil money is spent and poverty as a mainstay of terrorism.”

However, although the Americans were happy to use the report for their own purposes, this did not prevent President Bush's Administration



from exerting serious pressure for amendments to the chapter criticising the US invasion of Iraq and holding the Israeli Occupation partly responsible for the lack of growth and development in the Arab world. In fact, in addition to almost blocking the publication of the third part of the Arab human development report America cut the budget of the body in charge of supervising the publication of the reports by US\$ 12 million because of its displeasure with the contents of the first report.

Even if we accept the assumption that these reports were produced to serve America's political goals in the region, this does not explain the impact they had in becoming a major tool for mobilising political pressure to force the Arab regimes to introduce some urgent and substantial reforms. It was for this reason that Mohamed Hassanein Heikal observed: “[The report] was a bell which rang during the final minutes of the final hour of present-day Arab time [i.e. as the clock approached midnight].”

The distinctive features of the human development reports

The Arab human development reports have four distinctive features:

1 – At the practical level. A large number of Arab experts and intellectuals with specialist backgrounds were involved in their preparation. Their first meetings were brain-storming sessions during which some themes were suggested as a basis for exchanges of views and agreement on the general trends of the issues under discussion. By the conclusion of these meetings the broad outlines could be clearly seen; this led to a new phase during which the list of researchers was finalised and the relevant data, bibliographic information and texts were collected. Work was then ready to begin on the final version.

2 – At the methodological level. The reports aim to present a picture of the general Arab situation that is as close as possible to reality. To do this they comprise an enormous volume of figures, estimates and other documentary evidence which, taken together, represent an important database that politicians (whether government or opposition) cannot possibly ignore. In other words, these reports are a collection of facts about

the Arab world which are arranged methodically under a number of basic headings and help produce an accurate picture of a region that still has difficulty in diagnosing the precise nature of its own crises.

3 – Another feature of these regular reports is that they offer opportunities for dialogue between political and social activists and opinion-formers. In recent years this has enriched the literature on Arab development with new vocabulary and concepts from a global perspective; previously, much of what had been written about this subject was determined by the cultural/economic perspectives of the period following the 1967 defeat. Moreover, the reports also broadened the Arab intellectual class's horizons so that it was now able to look beyond the here and now; one of its previous strategic failings had been a serious degree of short-sightedness which had prevented many of its members from developing future scenarios based on realistic hypotheses rather than a mixture of wishful thinking, ideology and guesswork.

4 – The reports gave the Arab world a common frame of reference. Areas of discussion and investigation had formerly been limited solely to a narrow regional context, so despite the importance of certain specific local situations, the appearance of a pan-Arab report was able to highlight wider common elements – whether these consisted of problems and challenges affecting the whole of the Arab world or other matters such as the structure of the state and the intersection of cultural, political and economic factors.

The Arab region's common identity demands a single strategy and approach to the issues affecting it and its regional and international role.

Criticisms

The Arab human development reports were subjected to harsh criticism from Arab intellectuals with a range of different political and ideological affiliations. Some found fault with the general approach, while others objected to their content. To get an idea about the areas of disagreement and debate between the different strands that make up the Arab intellectual scene, let us take a look at a couple of examples.



Al Marzouqi rejects cultural stereotyping

Dr. Abu Ya‘rub al Marzouqi is wary of the solutions proposed by the writers of the report and says that the Arab human development reports have fallen into the “error of diagnosis based on comparison between the superficial characteristics of the human phenomenon, because they have failed to take into account the historical differences between different stages of civilizational development or recognize the part played by those stages in satisfying the conditions for effective development that changes the meanings of things and actions.” He also comments that “the report writers’ good intentions” can become “roads to the corridors of Hell, particularly if they are linked to America’s desire – after 11th September – for a policy that will ‘dry up the wellsprings’ with a new approach which could actually be a disguised version of the Western concept of human rights and ‘dry up the wellsprings’ for the simple reason that it [i.e. the Western concept of human rights] will be incompatible with some of our essential values.”

He believes that “the fundamental incongruity in this report is that it ignores the main issue, which is: How is it possible to reconcile human development ... with economic development in a society whose economic, scientific and technological base is still at a primitive stage?” He notes that most standards of comparison between peoples and nations are “to quote Ibn Khaldun, based on a yardstick produced by the prejudices of those who dominate a particular period of history.” That is why Westerners “imagine that people whose cultural and social structures and systems are different from their own are inferior human beings. Western ideologues – as well as most Arab experts – usually write reports that are inspired by their own ideologies and only take note of the facts when they fit their view of progress. What I am saying here is that they actually subscribe to the ‘End of History’ theory.”

Hence al Marzouqi says: “hasty comparisons are liable to impose unbearable burdens upon our countries - burdens the West itself was only able to assume after several centuries and because of its steady colonisation of the world and the exploitation of its resources.” He

then asks: “Are freedoms not achieved in stages and in tandem with development, and as a result of it not because of it (except in the final stages of development such as happened in the West, and in the East in the early stages of its ‘Renaissance’); I mean in circumstances similar to our present situation? Or are we exceptions to the laws of history?” He therefore rejects the idea of the Islamic world being subjected to what he calls “the methodology of formal comparison and quantitative criteria which measures progress and development on the basis of improvised indicators and overlooks the fundamental causes.”

Ridwan al Sayyid: “Schizophrenic consciousness” lies at the heart of the problem

Another example we have chosen in this connection is the position of Prof. Ridwan al Sayyid, who examined the reasons why the Americans welcomed the first human development report. In his view the authors of the report are not involved in a conspiracy; in fact, the Arab thinkers who helped produce it “had no intention of whetting Bush’s and the neo-conservatives’ grindstone; and it is also the case that it is absolutely vital to criticise the bad situation that prevails throughout the Arab nation, whether or not this pleases the Americans. At the same time, America’s demand that we should embrace religious, cultural and political change in the wake of 11th September – and the pressures it has been exerting to that end – should not make us commit ourselves to the conventionally accepted view. Rather, we could indeed find ourselves embracing change, though perhaps not in the way (or with the aims) that America and other parties in the East and West would like.” He believes that the Arab world’s problems “oblige us – as societies and elites – to have a radical rethink about our ways of thinking and planning in the interests of our rights and dignity as human beings.”

Al Sayyid believes that the real reason for the effusive welcome with which the report was received – particularly by Westerners – is due to the harsh and dismissive language in the statements of the intellectuals who helped write it. Accordingly, he launches a bitter attack on those whom he describes as “the change neo-revolutionaries”. In his view their problem lies in the fact that they “have no real projects or plans; instead, they are



hopeless nihilists using the pretext that they have been struggling ‘in vain’ for the past four decades, and now they are declaring that there is no hope for either the countries or their societies.”

He sees the problem as being with the elites, particularly those who “for the past four decades have occupied executive positions in the fields of politics, administration, education or culture, or indeed in all those fields, and today place the responsibility [for their failings] upon the shoulders of the regimes with which they used to work, and also upon the societies on whose behalf they thought and planned (or were active players) for decade after decade.”

His objections also extend to the Arab elite class’s understanding of the concept of modernisation: “According to the prevailing ideology that permeates the report (though it cannot be clearly discerned because the term ‘development’ occurs in the report so frequently; this term can be problematic because it has such a wide meaning and may also itself be turned into an ideology), modernisation is a task that was assigned to the state five decades ago; however, it was unable to achieve it. This was not due to despotism, or indeed democracy, on the part of the rulers, but to the backwardness of the societies, who saw modernisation as a retrograde enforced process (according to Hisham Sharabi). So after the state gave up in despair, the task of modernisation has become the responsibility of the civil society, which finds itself having to confront both the backwardness of the masses and the despotism of the state.”

In his view these elites (among whom are the authors of the report) are the self-appointed legal guardians of the Arab people, endowed (by themselves, of course) with the mandate to lead the the public into the modern world. He sees their view of modernity as “dating from latter days of the Cold War as a value system of ‘modernity versus tradition’ - modernity being meaningless in any sense other than as opposition to tradition. This view implies that modernisation is a collection of positive values and practices and the converse of backwardness, which – in the idiom of the past generation of intellectuals – equals tradition.”

Moving from modernisation to the concept of the civil society (and he

has serious doubts about what precisely this might be), Ridwan al Sayyid asks: “What is this civil society (as if there were such things as ‘non-civil societies’!), seeing that our societies are backward, impotent and lacking in any kind of culture with a ‘development’ dimension or democratic character? If, for the sake of argument, we say that civil society consists of report-writers and those who support them, and those who share similar attitudes and work in NGOs or certain sections of the media, we will again come up against the fact that these people - who today are disgusted by our backwardness and see no hope for the future - used to hide behind the slogans of ‘modernisation’ (not ‘progress’), while working in cahoots with the ruling regimes and against the mass of the people. As such people have finally declared their bankruptcy, how can they expect us to endorse ‘post-modernism’ when they have lost hope in us and in our modernisation? And how can they expect us to have any faith in their ‘civil society’ when they have gone back to working hand in hand with the authorities against ‘the backward Islamists’?”

Al Sayyid rejects the contrast between “civil society” on the one hand and “the state and the community” on the other: “They point to the experiences of East Asia and Latin America and compare us with them and this shows our situation in an even worse light. However, in East Asia progress was – and continues to be – spearheaded by the state; so why should the state itself be an obstacle to progress in our particular countries?” Focusing on the role of the state, he addresses the authors of the report as follows: “We disagree with your view that the state should be dispensed with in the interests of the community, then that the community should be dispensed with in the interests of the civil society; that is to say, [in the interests of] you and you alone.”

The final point on which Ridwan al Sayyid disagrees with the authors of the report is “their failure to recognize the global contexts that are directly or indirectly responsible for backwardness and despotism. All your statistics, gentlemen, are correct. However, what is wrong or problematic is the [kind of ‘schizophrenic’] consciousness’ which excludes us from history, excludes us from the world and excludes us from politics (an area which includes inter-personal relations and serving the public interest) – [this



‘schizophrenic consciousness’ which flows] from the pens of those who [paradoxically] wish to see us enjoy the benefits of prosperity, progress and development!”

Al Sayyid places his hopes in those societies which he believes will behave and react in unexpected ways and catch intellectuals, governments and international movers and shakers unawares.

The revolutions have not yet developed their own school of thought

The views of Abu Ya‘rub al Marzouqi and Ridwan al Sayyid give us an idea of the sort of debate that is still sowing discord among the Arab elites. Its main focus is on the modernist interpretations of the prevailing culture and on how it can and should be changed.

This debate – which up to a point is commendably vigorous – needs to be reassessed in the light of the Arab movement for change which began in Tunisia and then moved on to Egypt before becoming an armed conflict in Libya. In Yemen it was peaceful, despite the fact that so many of that country’s population carry arms, while in Syria...

These movements took everybody by surprise and confounded the elites’ predictions. In doing so they gave rise to a new set of priorities that differed entirely from those of the established politico-cultural scene.

That being so, would the elites be right to continue using the same old tools for dealing with the radical changes brought about by these revolutions? Will the birth of a new Arab school of thought require a departure from the former way of thinking or a severance of all links with it?

Let us consider the following issues:

- The Arab movements for change demonstrated that the Arab region faces a single set of challenges. The situations in its different states are similar and it is liable to be affected by any major change that might happen in any individual state, which means that an “each one is different”, or “*dharri*” (“atomisation”) mentality, as the thinker Malik bin

Nabi calls it, will be useless in helping to explain the strong links between the disparate parts of the *Ummah* (Nation) and across the region as a whole.

- These popular movements showed that it is impossible to reform the state and government by adopting the old approach. The regimes refused to change their way of running public affairs, obstinately ignored the demands for reform put forward by the political and intellectual elites, and sought to marginalise and deride the civil society's political parties and activists. In doing so – and by deluding them and forcing them to hang around idly waiting for a “reform train” which never arrived – they created a sense of frustration and despair among the intellectual class and those calling for change. To start with, the ruling regimes found the situation highly satisfactory, but in fact it was eating them away from within and creating a vacuum that eventually sparked a revolt on the part of the youth and other marginalised sections of the community, who turned to modern communications technology to generate social firestorms in different parts of the region. However, because of the obstinacy and dominance of the culture of despotism, and because the governments relied heavily on the use of security solutions for tackling political, social and cultural opposition, as well as the fact that they were stuck fast in a morass of corruption, several of the regimes still refused to countenance the idea of reform. This led to the rise of protest movements which quickly became widespread *intifadas* and, finally, open revolts which enabled the mass of the population to shake off their fear complex and change at least two regimes – in Tunisia and Egypt. These developments revealed the limits of the cultural and political elites' ability to foresee the future or provide the popular masses with leadership at a time of revolution and democratic transition.

If we go back and take a second look at the human development reports we will find that they were largely right, though they were unable to predict the probability of these wide-ranging revolutions taking place or the suddenness with which they occurred. They also underestimated the power of the people.



Despite the suddenness of the Arab revolutions, they did not take place in a vacuum. In addition to various social, economic and political factors – which fed the rebellious trend against the people’s miserable conditions – a large stockpile of ideas and values had begun to build up and have an impact upon hearts and minds. This explains the mature attitudes of the masses in the countries in which there were wide popular uprisings. It also means that previous efforts and initiatives launched by the intellectual classes under various pretexts were not a complete waste of time, even though they did not bear fruit initially; instead, their effect turned out to have been cumulative. Ideas do not die but add themselves to the popular consciousness, where they wait until the conditions are ripe for them to rise to the surface again in different circumstances. Demands for justice, jobs, freedom and equality before the law are values and ideas which have been pivotal to the efforts of the leading reformists over the past thirty years, and they provided the forward-looking Arab movements with the foundations on which they were able to build their strategies.

Like the ideas that give birth to them, revolutions are subject to the “law of assimilation and disposal”. When something is old this does not mean it is totally invalid and thus destined for the dustbin of history, as they say; rather, it is a ‘compound’ – a mixture of successes and failures, positives and negatives. Revolutionary ideas are sound when they do not lead to a repeat of the mistakes of the past and are able to reconstruct systems using a coherent approach that leads to better conditions for the community as a whole. It is because of this that there are disagreements today between the different forces in Tunisia and Egypt as they seek to establish a new culture which reflects a massive political transformation – one that has not yet been translated into a clear ideology.

The question on many people’s lips today is: Is reform incompatible with revolution? At the birth of the Arab Renaissance – and after the failure of the successive military coups which accompanied the rise of the nationalist movements from the early 1950s with their revolutionary slogans – every variation on the theme of Arab thought acquired a reformist character. However, with today’s revolutions and what has been described as the Arab Spring, does this mean that the entire reformist

system needs to be turned on its head? Or is it possible for reform to become an agent of change in which the sequence or “style” of the reforms is different rather than their essential character and content? This is actually the case where the Tunisian and Egyptian political scenes are concerned. Both countries have committed themselves to an agenda of democratic transition with a revised constitution and interim government; the leading figures of the previous regimes are being held to account, there is a free press and freedom to form political parties and dates have been set for free and fair elections. At the same time, however, there are differences between them in their approach and order of priorities.

This is the case in the political sphere. Meanwhile, at the cultural and intellectual level tussles are still ongoing between the different groups who took part in the revolutions and there are no signs yet of a new ideology.

These movements attached significantly greater importance to politics than they did to the economy and culture, mainly because they found themselves in conflict with their ruling regimes after the latter proved to be an obstacle to genuine and far-reaching reforms; that is to say, in contrast to politics, cultural and economic obstacles were no impediment to changes in the balance of political power so they were not given the same priority. In this respect the Arab revolutions have been no different from earlier revolutions in other parts of the world, including the French and Bolshevik Revolutions; however, the main challenge they have to face is, and will continue to be, economic and is about how to define a alternative vision of development that will be capable of achieving social justice between all groups and individuals while ensuring higher productivity and the effective exploitation of national resources.

That is the main challenge. The literature on development that has gained currency in recent years, and the policies put forward by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and imposed upon the states of the region, have helped make the situation even more critical, creating even more severe difficulties for its governments and for the growth of a post-revolutionary economy.



This is a huge challenge for the intellectuals and experts who helped produce the human development reports, as well as for other Arab intellectuals including the reports' critics. This is because when the balance of power shifted in favour of change thanks to the valiant efforts of the vital sections of the Arab masses, particularly the youth, there were no qualified experts on the economy or development available to offer positive alternative solutions capable of negotiating the slippery slopes of the market economy and overcoming the sterile wilderness of a neo-liberalism that makes gods out of the market and modernisation.