

The
Economist

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Can conquests centuries ago explain the democratic deficit in the Arab world today?

Apr 7th 2012 | from the print edition

THE popular unrest that swept north Africa and the Middle East in 2011 has injected fresh life into an



old debate: can democracy come to the Arab world? There is no doubt the region suffers from a democratic deficit. Arab League states account for almost a third of the world's autocracies, according to a democracy index constructed by the Economist Intelligence Unit, a sister company of *The Economist*. The challenge is understanding why. Popular theories include those that cite Arab or Islamic culture, the corrosive impact of regional conflict, or the curse of oil wealth. But research* by Eric Chaney, an economist at Harvard University, offers another explanation with deep institutional roots. Expect the theory to get a mixed reception: it is a brave economist who ventures into the specialist domain of Arabists.

Mr Chaney's attention was caught by the fact the "Arab" democratic

deficit extends beyond the modern Arab world. In fact, it is almost perfectly conterminous with lands conquered by Muslim dynasties in the centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The caliphs who succeeded Muhammad as leaders of the Islamic world greatly expanded Muslim territory. At its greatest extent, their armies reached south to Somalia, north to Iberia and eastern Anatolia, and east to modern Tajikistan, close to the border with China. Mr Chaney's hypothesis is that this boundary helps explain democratic shortfalls today.

Mr Chaney identifies countries at least half of whose present-day land mass was conquered by Muslim armies by the year 1100 and which thereafter remained under Islamic rule. (Those countries, like Spain, whose Islamic institutions were soon displaced are excluded.) Mr Chaney then uses a common measure of democratisation known as a "polity IV" score to test various narratives of Arab political stagnation. He normalises the score so that zero corresponds to "strongly autocratic" institutions (like Saudi Arabia) while 1 represents a strong democracy (like America).

Islamic culture is a common scapegoat for the Arab democratic deficit: some scholars single out the subservient status of women or low levels of education for special criticism. In aggregate, Muslim-majority countries are indeed about 0.3 polity points less democratic than the rest of the world. But this overall gap is misleading. By dividing the Muslim world into conquered countries and those spared conquest, Mr Chaney finds that the democratic deficit remains for the former group but vanishes for the latter. Conquered non-Arab states like Uzbekistan look like those in the Arab League whereas non-conquered Muslim states like Albania and Indonesia do not.

Others have argued that the Arab-Israeli conflict is an obstacle to democratic transitions in the Arab world. Yet Mr Chaney's results persist when the Arab states closest to Israel are excluded from his analysis (the results should change if a particular factor is independently constricting democracy within the excluded group). Oil, too, is often faulted for strengthening anti-democratic regimes. Mr Chaney does indeed find evidence that oil wealth may retard democratic development but conquest continues to predict a democratic deficit whether or not "fuel-endowed" countries are excluded from the sample.

Mr Chaney speculates that conquest altered society, casting an autocratic shadow across the centuries. Rulers came to rely on slave armies, freeing them from dependence on civil institutions. Religious leaders co-operated with the army to design a system that proved

enduringly hostile to alternative centres of power. Lands brought to Islam by conversion maintained some civil institutions. In unconquered Europe, meanwhile, monarchs relied on the nobility to raise manpower and money for war. That gave the nobles enough leverage to check absolutism. Across the conquered world civil society remains institutionally impoverished, says Mr Chaney: the share of government in GDP is seven percentage points higher in conquered states than in other Muslim states, for example.

The importance of desert geography is another explanation for Arab autocracy. In a 2010 paper Stephen Haber of Stanford University and Victor Menaldo of the University of Washington argue that desert institutions inhibit democracy. Moderate rainfall breeds settled agriculture, they reckon, fostering urbanisation, trade and state-building. Arid land undermined the development of the modern state, a necessary if not sufficient condition for democratisation.

There is a close relationship between desert terrain and conquest: camel-borne Arab armies were well-equipped to travel and fight over desert. But Mr Chaney reckons that the legacy of conquest is more important than rainfall. There is no statistically significant relationship between aridity and autocracy outside the conquered world. Mr Chaney does identify some conquered countries with rainfall levels similar to those of unconquered Muslim states. Within this overlapping sample, the conquest states again align with the democratic deficit. Iran is autocratic; Mongolia, with a similar level of rainfall, is not.

No slave to history

Even if Mr Chaney is right, history is not destiny: the Arab world can escape its autocratic past. Education levels in Arab-conquered countries have nearly converged to those in the non-conquest Muslim world. This may drive popular dissatisfaction with limited economic opportunities and increase pressure for political change. But a long-standing poverty of civil institutions is nonetheless an obstacle to democratic transition. Change may be in the offing, but the past must be uprooted first.

* "Democratic Change in the Arab World, Past and Present (<http://www.brookings.edu/economics/bpea/Latest-Conference/chaney.aspx>) " by Eric Chaney. Prepared for the Brookings Panel on Economic Activity, March 2012

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