

A Good Place to Have Aided Democracy

By Anne Applebaum
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TUNIS -- "If you wanted to support democracy in the Arab world, why did you begin with your enemies instead of your friends? Why Iraq and Iran? Why not us?"

It's an excellent question, and when it was posed to me a few days ago by Mokhtar Trifi, president of the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights, I at first found it hard to answer. Trifi, whose dark suit and elegant French make him seem like the statesman he ought to be, does indeed seem a far better candidate for American friendship and support than, say, the prime minister of Iraq. Because Tunisia also seems, on the surface, much closer to the West than many of its neighbors, it makes a curious example of what might have been.

Like Turkey, Tunisia is an avowedly secular Muslim state: Women here have the right to divorce and to marry as they please. Most do not wear headscarves, let alone veils. Much of the economy is private: The average income has risen in recent decades, and the middle class is relatively well educated. On a Friday afternoon in the suburbs of Tunis, every other street corner seems to feature a lycee, from which pour crowds of blue-jeaned teenagers, boys and girls, chatting and laughing. Ask them and they will tell you they feel more Mediterranean than Arab, that they have more in common with Parisians than with Syrians or Saudis.

But surfaces are deceiving, as Trifi -- whose office is haunted by omnipresent goons, whose visitors are sometimes harassed and who is occasionally [beaten up himself](#)-- can testify. One French analyst, [Beatrice Hibou](#), has described how the myth of "reform" has been used in Tunisia to disguise from the world the deepening corruption, nepotism and stagnation of a one-party state, dominated by what is, in effect, a president-for-life. While French politicians speak of the Tunisian "economic miracle," party cadres connive to keep the best jobs. Though the United Nations held its "[World Summit on the Information Society](#)" in Tunis in 2005, Tunisia deploys an [Internet filtering and control regime](#) draconian even by the standards of the Arab world. The goons hang about the Internet cafes, too, hands stuffed in the pockets of their windbreakers.

The Tunisians have also become masters of a kind of recognizable, Putinesque, postmodern political charade, supporting a whole panoply of phony political parties, phony human rights groups, phony elections. They talk of "democracy" and "reform" and of course "anti-terrorism." But break the mold in Tunisia -- engage in genuine opposition politics -- and you might find you've lost your state health care or even your private-sector job. The tentacles of the party reach deep, though actual violence is rare. Says Trifi,

"It causes too much trouble." After all, violence could damage the benevolent image that draws so many European tourists to Tunisia's beaches.

In the short term, this system has suited lots of people, not merely the president's friends and relations. Most notably, it has suited France, Tunisia's closest business partner and former colonial power. In 2003, French President Jacques Chirac proclaimed that since "the most important human rights are the rights to be fed, to have health, to be educated and to be housed," Tunisia's human rights record is "very advanced." More to the point, the French believe that the authoritarian Tunisian government is the only thing preventing a massive wave of illegal immigration to their country. Unfortunately, the authoritarian government is also producing the potential émigrés, too: For the most notable product of the Tunisian "economic miracle" is, at the moment, a lot of well-educated but unemployed young people. Once upon a time, the educated and the frustrated might have formed the backbone of a democratic revolution, just as they once did in South America and Eastern Europe. Now, Tunisians look at Iraq and see that "freedom" brings chaos and violence. Which leaves them with two options: emigration -- or radical Islam. Or perhaps both.

No one knows the true extent of radicalism in Tunisia because it is in the government's interests to exaggerate the threat. Nor does anyone know the true extent of Tunisian radicalism in the suburbs of Paris. But there have been bombs, arrests and reports of al-Qaeda copycat groups. Thus has an apparently benign authoritarianism produced in liberal Tunisia, as everywhere else in the Arab world, precisely the sort of terrorist inclinations it was supposed to prevent.

So why didn't the West interest itself in Tunisian democracy 15 years ago, back before "democracy" became a negative term, back before the not-quite-free economy went sour, back before radical Islam became chic among the blue-jeaned teenagers? The answers, as Trifi knows well, are clear: Because democracy promotion was an afterthought, never an important American goal in the Middle East. Because France, which has far more influence in Tunisia than we do, has never been remotely interested. And because no one in the West has ever been very good at thinking through what the longer-term results of the authoritarian status quo might really be.

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