

Walk the democracy talk: Panelists

SAIF SHAHIN

DOHA Even though the Arab world had made considerable conceptual progress on how to usher in democratic reforms, most of the ideas were still to be implemented, a panel of scholars and politicians from the region and beyond agreed on Tuesday.

The panel included former Hungarian premier Victor Orban, former UK foreign secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind, American political scientist Nathan Brown, Arab Transitional Parliament's Tayeb al Misbahi and Moroccan academic Abdulrahim Eslami. Scott Bates of the Washington-based National Democratic Institute moderated the discussion on the last day of the Eighth Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade.

"We can see tremendous intellectual progress in the Arab world on the issue of democracy. The debates have become freer and more wide-ranging. Reform proposals have been developed by a number of intellectuals and political parties. So democracy



Panelists addressing a session on democracy in Doha on Tuesday. (JALAL PATHIYOOR)

has obviously been gaining," said Brown.

"But we can also see a failure in translating these ideas into action. The institutions of democracy are weak in some Arab countries. In Palestine, for instance, people might soon be without leadership. And in countries where the institutions are strong, they are not able to

shake off political authoritarianism. For example, despite the region's strong judicial heritage, the judiciary in many Arab countries is not able to operate freely."

Brown also said political opposition was treated as a security threat in many countries. And half-way measures had led to semi-authoritarian

systems. "In Kuwait, parliament is too weak to take constructive action. Such developments can actually diminish the attractiveness of democracy for the people," he cautioned.

Rifkind said democracy had become a grossly overused term today, with every country and every despot making claims to it. Democracy should be meas-

ured on two factors alone: did people have the power to change their government, and did the rule of law prevail in their land. "And rule of law means it is not just the people but also the government that is subservient to the law," he said.

The conservative parliamentarian dwelt upon the march of democracy in many parts of the globe since the collapse of communism, but rued the lack of progress in China, Russia and the Middle East and North Africa region. However, he added that lack of democracy in the Arab world had little to do with Islam, as the democratic polities of Indonesia, Turkey and Pakistan illustrated.

"These trends show that democracy is easier to reintroduce in countries that have tasted it in the past, as Pakistan recently exemplified. Also, for democracy to work, people should be willing to change their vote based on the performance of the government. Otherwise, democracy can become a recipe for sectarianism, as is happening in Iraq. Thirdly, you cannot always predict who benefit from

Sir Malcolm Rifkind said democratisation was a gradual process, and politics should be allowed to evolve – while ensuring that gradualism did not become an euphemism for status quoism.

democracy. In places like Algeria and Palestine, extremist parties have gone on to win elections," said Rifkind.

He suggested the Western powers should not try to impose democracy through invasion. It was a gradual process, and democratic polities should be allowed to evolve – while ensuring that gradualism did not become an euphemism for status quoism.

"We also need to institutionalise power-sharing so that people do not approach democracy as a winner-takes-all game. The electoral victory of extremists should not mean that they be treated like other democratic

powers, unless they give up their extremist ways. Lastly, democracy is about the rule of law. The Middle East needs free media and free judiciary to turn more democratic."

Orban approached the subject from what he described as a central European perspective, saying that the recent wave of democratic change worldwide had created doubts in many minds. Ex-Leftist dictators had embraced free markets, but not free societies, creating confusion over the meaning of democracy.

Al Misbahi blamed the concept of statehood left behind by European colonisers for the authoritarianism witnessed in the Arab world today. He recommended the "Moroccan model" of statehood for the region. "Morocco decided there could be no democracy without development, and there could be no reforms without reconciliation between the government and the people. King Mohammed VI therefore set up the Fairness and Reconciliation Commission to build trust between the state and citizens," he said.

'GCC needs to establish an independent central bank'

GYANENDRA KESHRI

DOHA An independent central bank is a must for realising the objectives of a single currency in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, economists say.

"If the GCC countries want a single currency, first they have to set up a common central bank and that should be independent," Lebanese economist Ghassan Ayash said at the Eighth Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade, on Tuesday.

He emphasised the need for greater autonomy of the central banks in the region. "There has been extreme influence from the governments on the central banks in the region," said Ayash, who had worked in the central bank in Lebanon. He said frequent government interference in the activities of a central bank complicates the monetary policy.

Ayash said the GCC countries should establish a common central bank on the lines of the European Central Bank, which is responsible for the management of the monetary policy of the euro zone.

He said the Gulf countries should take a lesson from the experience of European countries, as it



Lebanese economist Ghassan Ayash (left) and former Lord Mayor of London Sir Gavyn Arthur at the Eighth Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade on Tuesday.

would be very useful in the implementation of the monetary union. The GCC countries, including Qatar, plan to set up a monetary union by 2010.

Speaking at the conference, former Lord Mayor of London, Sir Gavyn Arthur, said the Gulf countries were emerging as an important player in world economy. He said the sovereign wealth funds created by the Gulf countries including Qatar would play a significant role in overcoming the current economic turmoil.

Qatari guests listening to experts during a session of the Eighth Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade, held at the Sheraton hotel, on Tuesday. There was a healthy audience participation throughout the three-day conference.

(JALAL PATHIYOOR)



Knesset member's revelation shocks all

Continued from page 17

Abdelbari Atwan, chief editor of Alquds Alarabi newspaper in London, accused the Arab countries of accepting media rules and regulations as dictated to them by the West. "The concept

of removing ministries of information from some Arab countries was dictated by the West. They even fiddle with the contents of the internet on the pretext of blocking pornographic websites," he said. Atwan said the future of media was bleak in

the Arab world as there were governments waiting to 'tear apart' journalists who wrote anti-establishment reports.

Lord Tim Bell, who heads Chime Communications in the UK, said that people should be allowed to judge the future course of media. "Surveys have revealed that soap operas are the most viewed programmes. Hence, they must be effectively used to convey important information," he added.

Mohamed al Rumaihi, chief editor of Awan daily in Kuwait, said that the Arab media continued to behave in an immature fashion. "Yasser Arafat, the legendary Palestinian leader, had fired the head of the Palestinian national television for allowing his rival to appear on the television. In the past, the Arab media has published inflated figures of casualties in Israel. This provides the common man a very wrong picture," he added.