Opinion

Why the Arab World Needs Democracy Now

In April Jamal Khashoggi gave this speech, saying the dangerous idea of the benevolent autocrat, the just dictator, is being revived in the Arab world.

By Jamal Khashoggi
Mr. Khashoggi was a Saudi journalist.

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Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi Arabian journalist who was killed by Saudi agents inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on Oct. 2, was the keynote speaker at a conference in April organized by the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Denver and the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Washington. Excerpts from his speech, edited for clarity and length, are below.

I am from Saudi Arabia, where the issues of democracy and Islam are very much relevant. When a Saudi official wanted to brush away the question of democracy, in the
past, he would always raise the question of whether democracy is compatible with Islam.

The debate about the relationship between Islam and democracy conclusively ended with the coming of the Arab Spring, when the people of the Arab world, — especially the youth, and even the Islamists, including some Salafis, who were always critical of democracy — supported the protests for democratic and political change. Other Salafis remained very critical of democracy, viewing it as “kufr,” or un-Islamic, based on the belief that democracy represents a rejection of religious values.

The long voting lines during the 2012 elections in Tunisia and Egypt clearly demonstrated that the people of the Arab world were ready for change. They enthusiastically participated in democratic elections, including Islamist parties that had often been the focus of the debate on Islam’s compatibility with democracy.

Those images from Egypt and Tunisia of men, women, young, and old going to the polls should be contrasted with the sham elections we see today in Egypt and in other parts of the Arab world. This is an argument we can use against anyone who might claim that “Arabs are not ready for democracy.”

Today, Saudi Arabia is struggling with different aspects of modernity — with cinemas, art, entertainment, mixing of the sexes, opening up to the world, rejecting radicalism. The tight grip that the religious establishment has had on social life is gradually loosening.

But while we’re pursuing all these forms of modernity, the Saudi leaders are still not interested in democracy, They aren’t advancing the old, lame excuse that democracy is not compatible with Islam, however. Instead, as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told Jeffrey Goldberg in The Atlantic they’re saying that absolute monarchy is our preferred form of government.

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Indeed, we are living in the age of authoritarianism. Some people believe that it is a better form of political rule. They argue that societies need a great leader and that democracy will undermine the ability of the great leader to guide his people to a better future.

Today around a dinner table in Riyadh, Cairo or Amman, you are likely to hear intellectuals who were once considered liberals, who once supported liberty, political change and democracy, say, “Arabs are not ready for democracy.” If you push back against this argument, you would be told: “Even if Arabs are ready for democracy, they don’t know how to take advantage of it. They always make the wrong choice.”

A related argument is, “The Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood have kidnapped the Arab Spring.” In my country, a variant of this argument is: “The Saudis don’t know how to choose. If we have democracy, they will not vote out of their conscience, they will vote based on their tribal loyalties.”

A popular argument in the Arab world is that we need a strong leader. You can hear it in Egypt from an Egyptian businessman who supports the ruling regime. You can hear it from a doubtful Jordanian, maybe even a doubtful Tunisian who seeks a return to the old order.

A Saudi friend of mine who was raised abroad openly defends the term “benevolent autocracy.” He is prepared to write about the value of benevolent autocracy in an American newspaper and thinks it is the best choice for Saudi Arabia.

It is the old notion of the “mustabidu al-adl,” or the just dictator, that died with the rise of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, a late-19th-century Arab-Muslim reformist of Syrian origin. The Arab and Muslim intellectuals who followed Kawakibi supported democracy or at least some variant of it.

Regrettably, though, the idea of the benevolent autocrat, the just dictator, is being revived in the Arab world. A chorus of anti-democratic Arab and non-Arab voices are using the media and the lobbyists to oppose democracy. I’m told that at the Riyadh International Book Fair in March, which I was not able to attend, one of the books on display was called “Against the Arab Spring.”

Democracy in the Arab world is also under attack from radical Islamists who are making a comeback as the so-called Islamic State or as the Salafis fighting in Libya.
alongside Khalifa Hifter (who was a general in Muammar Gaddafi’s army and is now backed by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt). They preach against democracy in the mosques — and through acts of violence.

We must reassure people in the Arab world who either have lost hope in democracy because of its perceived failures or because they fell victim to the concentrated propaganda about democracy coming from television networks run by states and the intellectuals aligned with them.

When I use the term “democracy” I mean it in the broader sense of the term that overlaps with values such as liberty, checks and balances, accountability and transparency. We were aiming for these goals in the form of good governance, equality, and justice in the Arab world. There is another reason we need democracy now in the Arab world: to stop mass violence.

Today, there are two kinds of Arab countries. Some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco, need democracy for good governance and the checks and balances it brings.

But for war-torn countries like Libya, Syria and Yemen, democracy would lead to some form of power sharing. It can be along the lines of the Afghanistan arrangement, where you bring all of the factions in one huge room and force them into an agreement on how to share power. The chief reason the wars in these countries are continuing is the lack of a mechanism for power sharing.

The immediate need for Libya, Syria and Yemen is not good governance, but a mechanism to stop the killing. Inevitably, the question of good governance will emerge. There is great hope for democracy in other countries that have not been mired in civil or internal conflict, such as Tunisia, which is struggling toward a lasting democratic system.

Many of my Tunisian friends, despite the progress they have made, are also worried about democracy. They do not want to appear to be preaching to the rest of the Arab world. They simply want to be left alone. Yet I still think that Tunisians have an important responsibility.

News channels that are supportive of freedom and political change in the Middle East should spend a considerable amount of time covering even municipal elections in Tunisia. Every Saudi, every Egyptian and every Syrian should see what the Tunisians are enjoying. I hope it will inspire the rest of the Arab world to work for a similar form of government for themselves.
We need to defend the rights of the Arab people to have democracy in our own countries, in our own localities, but at the same time we must speak to foreign leaders, foreign powers and foreign parliamentarians. They have a role to play and many of them have begun to lose hope in the prospects of Arab democracy.

Some of them are now repeating the old racist statement, “Arabs are not ready for democracy [because they are Arabs].” The Trump administration has zero interest in supporting democracy in the Arab world. Even the French president, Emmanuel Macron, has suggested that there will be little political change in Egypt or in Saudi Arabia.

People are losing hope in democracy because of the failure of the Arab Spring revolts. They’re afraid of ending up like Syria. Many Arab regimes, their television networks, their writers, their commentators, are trying to scare people off democracy by actively promoting this idea.

Both Arab citizens and foreign leaders are affected by the limited reforms that Arab leaders are pursuing. In Saudi Arabia there are serious reforms that Prince Mohammed is leading. Many of my Saudi colleagues are saying I should support them. I do support them.

My position is that we should take what we have and build on it.

When Mr. Macron stood next to Prince Mohammed, he made this point and he was correct to do so. We need to support the crown prince in his effort to reform Saudi Arabia because if we let him down, he will come under pressure from radical elements who are not willing to reform.

These limited reforms and the general political condition of the Arab world today are adding strength to the argument of the anti-democracy forces. This unfortunate reality puts more responsibility on our shoulders to resume our work and to redouble our efforts to push for democracy in the Arab world as a realistic choice for people and a solution to the failure of many Arab states.

Jamal Khashoggi was a Washington Post Global Opinions contributing columnist.