Security focus hinders progress in Arab world

Moneef Zou'bi, head of the Islamic World Academy of Sciences, discusses the prospects for democracy and science in the region.

Declan Butler

The political earthquake that is shaking the Arab world has highlighted the need for greater democracy and freedoms in order for science and education to flourish.

Egyptian scientists, who are supporting the current protests in their country, have emphasized the importance of that link (see 'Egypt's youth 'key to revival'' mirroring the experiences and hopes of Tunisian scientists (see 'Tunisian scientists rejoice at freedom') immediately after President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was deposed last month. The link between societal freedoms and innovation was also articulated in a 2003 report — Building a Knowledge Society — in the Arab Human Development Report series co-published by the United Nations Development Programme and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (see 'Islam and Science: Steps towards reform').

Nature spoke to Moneef Zou'bi, director-general of the Islamic World Academy of Sciences, which promotes science for development from its base in Amman, Jordan, about the relationship between the political landscape of the Arab world and its poor track record in science and innovation.

Scientists in Egypt have embraced and joined the protests there, arguing that democracy and greater freedoms, and radical reform of science and education, reinforce each other and are crucial to the country's future. What is your position?

The academy doesn't have an official position on the politics of what's happening in Egypt. It is not the role of an international science academy to take positions, or make comments or judgements, on political developments in any one country.

The academy has, however, always been concerned with indicators of good governance, such as the rule of law and government accountability. We have always called on Arab and Muslim-majority states to try to introduce the appropriate environment for innovation and science and technology, including human rights and democracy.

The chapter on Arab states in the UNESCO Science Report 2010 published last November [by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization], which I co-authored, also contains strong messages along these lines.
We think that science and technology blossom in a free environment that enables people to be creative and innovative. Yet at the same time, political support and finance are also required. So the academy has been calling for a sort of middle ground, between free, creativity-inducing environments, and environments in which science is strongly supported by governments and decision makers.

"How can you have democracy in the Middle East with so many regional conflicts around?"

What concerns us most is the well-being of individual citizens, not only in terms of their political rights and freedoms, but also in terms of the provision of a decent education, decent healthcare, adequate water supplies, adequate food and good housing. These go in tandem. You cannot talk about freedom of expression without actually providing the very basic services to your populations.

Many of the governments of the 57 member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference are not doing a good job of providing the very basic life-sustaining services to the people. That's why the latter has been our major concern; at the same time we are also calling for greater freedom and democracy.

Authoritarian regimes often use the argument that providing such basic services represents progress in human rights, as a way to justify their continuing denial of democracy. But researchers in Egypt argue that the denial of freedoms under the Mubarak regime has hampered such social and economic development, and contributed to the country's economic and social woes. Do you agree with them?

Throughout the Arab world, one needs to appreciate that the starting point has been very low in all areas, in science and technology, in higher education, in innovation. Illiteracy remains high, and the higher-education infrastructure was largely not there before the 1960s. Egypt, not only because of its own politics but also because of the politics of the region, has had a starting point back in the 1980s that was very low.

Egypt has not performed as well as South Korea, for example, even though both countries were at the same level back in the 1960s, but this is due to internal and external factors. Brain drain has affected Egypt's development very strongly, as has the lack of finance for research and higher education. Egypt has not been a success story, but the same goes for the majority of countries in the Arab world.

We are in favour of development, and we are committed to democratic values, although not necessarily the same democratic values you have in Europe. The politics of the region are so complicated that you have to view the region in a unique way that probably doesn't apply to anywhere else in the world. This situation means that it is very difficult to make objective judgements on any political developments.

You seem to be suggesting that Western-style democracy in the Arab world is almost impossible.

It is not impossible. But I think you must have a solid platform on which you can build democracy, in terms of literacy and regional peace, for example. How can you have democracy in the Middle East with so many regional conflicts around? In the majority of Arab states, security concerns are the top priority, and as far as regimes are concerned that means military security.

What the academy has been telling our decision makers in the Arab and Muslim-majority world is that security must also be about socioeconomic development, such as food, energy, water, health and security for their citizens.

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