DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS: GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS AND US CHALLENGES IN MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Mukhtar IMAM,

Department of International Relations, Al-Muhibbah Open University, Abuja-Nigeria

mukhtarimam01@gmail.com

&

Chubado Babbi TIJJANI,

Department of Political Science & Int'l Relations, Nile University of Nigeria, Abuja, Nigeria

chubadotijjani@gmail.com

Abstract

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has long been characterized by political instability, conflict, and authoritarian governance. In recent years, the region has witnessed a deepening crisis of democracy, marked by the erosion of democratic institutions, the resurgence of authoritarianism, and the rise of non-state actors. This article examines the geopolitical shifts shaping the crisis of democracy in the MENA region and assesses the challenges facing the United States in promoting democratic governance and stability. Through a comprehensive review of literature and analysis of recent developments, this article argues that geopolitical dynamics, including great power competition, regional rivalries, and socio-economic factors, have contributed to the erosion of democracy in the MENA region. In response, the United States must recalibrate its approach to the region, prioritizing support for democratic reforms, human rights, and inclusive governance, while also addressing security threats and advancing its strategic interests.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been a focal point of geopolitical competition and conflict for decades, with profound implications for regional stability, global security, and democratic governance. Despite aspirations for democratic change sparked by the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the region has experienced a deepening crisis of democracy characterized by political instability, authoritarian retrenchment, and the rise of non-state actors. This article examines the geopolitical shifts shaping the crisis of democracy in the MENA region and assesses the challenges facing the United States in promoting democratic governance and stability.

Geopolitical Shifts and the Crisis of Democracy

Several interconnected geopolitical factors have contributed to the crisis of democracy in the MENA region. First, the resurgence of authoritarianism has been fuelled by regional rivalries and the competition for influence among major powers, including the United States, Russia, and Iran. Authoritarian regimes have capitalized on external support to suppress dissent, consolidate power, and undermine democratic reforms, perpetuating a cycle of repression and instability.

Second, the rise of non-state actors, including terrorist organizations and militant groups, has posed significant challenges to democratic governance and stability in the region. Extremist ideologies, sectarian tensions, and the proliferation of weapons have fuelled violence and instability, undermining efforts to build democratic institutions and promote inclusive governance. Moreover, non-state actors have exploited power vacuums and weak state institutions to establish control over territory and resources, further eroding the prospects for democratic development.

Third, socio-economic factors, including youth unemployment, income inequality, and demographic pressures, have contributed to popular discontent and political instability in the MENA region. Despite initial hopes for democratic change following the Arab Spring uprisings, many countries have struggled to address structural challenges and deliver meaningful socio-economic reforms, exacerbating grievances and fuelling social unrest (Brown, 2018).

2. US CHALLENGES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The crisis of democracy in the MENA region presents significant challenges for the United States, which has long sought to promote democratic governance, human rights, and stability in the region. However, the United States faces complex geopolitical dynamics and competing priorities that constrain its ability to advance its democratic agenda effectively.

First, the United States must navigate the complexities of great power competition in the region, particularly with Russia and China, which have sought to expand their influence and undermine those of its rivals, the West. Balancing competition with cooperation, the United States must engage with these powers to address shared security challenges while also promoting democratic values and principles.

Second, the United States must contend with regional rivalries and conflicts, including the ongoing civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, which have fueled instability and humanitarian crises. While pursuing diplomatic efforts to resolve these conflicts, the United States must also support efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, promote inclusive governance, and address the root causes of conflict. While also admitting responsibility in cases where its role in such conflict has become manifest.

Third, the United States must address the underlying socio-economic drivers of instability and political unrest in the MENA region. This requires sustained engagement and investment in economic development, job creation, and social welfare programs to address inequality, poverty, and youth disillusionment (Marc, 2022).

3. REGIONAL DYNAMICS AND LOCAL FACTORS

In addition to geopolitical shifts, regional dynamics and local factors play a crucial role in shaping the crisis of democracy in the MENA region. Regional rivalries and alliances, such as the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, have exacerbated conflicts and fuelled proxy wars, undermining prospects for democratic governance and stability. Moreover, the legacy of colonialism, state-building processes, and historical grievances have contributed to the fragmentation of state institutions and the emergence of authoritarian regimes that prioritize regime survival over democratic reforms (Raymond, 2022).

Furthermore, the role of non-state actors, including so-called Islamist movements, armed militias, and tribal groups, cannot be overlooked in the context of the crisis of democracy in the MENA region. While some so-called Islamist movements have sought to participate in democratic processes and governance, others have resorted to violence and coercion to advance their political agendas, undermining democratic norms and institutions. Similarly, armed militias and tribal factions have often operated outside the control of central authorities, challenging state sovereignty and exacerbating security challenges (Posusney, 2023).

Moreover, socio-economic factors, such as high levels of youth unemployment, poverty, and corruption, have fueled popular discontent and political unrest in the MENA region. Despite significant natural resources, many countries in the region have struggled to diversify their economies, create job opportunities, and address social inequalities, exacerbating grievances and fuelling social unrest. Additionally, widespread corruption and lack of transparency have eroded trust in government institutions and undermined public confidence in the democratic process (Joel, 2021).

4. US POLICY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The crisis of democracy in the MENA region poses significant challenges for US foreign policy, which has a blend of energy security and promoting democratic governance, human rights, and stability in the region. However, the United States faces a complex set of challenges and constraints in advancing its democratic agenda effectively (Steven, 2021).

First, the United States must navigate the complexities of great power competition in the region, particularly with Russia and China, which have sought to expand their influence and undermine those of their rivals. While pursuing cooperation with these powers on shared security challenges, the United States must also, with sincerity of purpose, promote democratic values and principles and push back against efforts to undermine democracy and human rights, without undermining local authorities (Larry, 2021).

Second, the United States must contend with regional rivalries and conflicts that have fueled instability and humanitarian crises in the MENA region. While pursuing diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts, the United States must also support efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, promote inclusive governance, and address the root causes of conflict, including socio-economic grievances and political exclusion (Marina, 2023).

Third, the United States must address the underlying socio-economic drivers of instability and political unrest in the MENA region. This requires sustained engagement and investment in economic development, job creation, and social welfare programs to address inequality, poverty, and youth disillusionment. Likewise, the United States must support civil society organizations, independent media, and grassroots movements that are working to promote democratic reforms and advance human rights in the region (Ellen, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the crisis of democracy in the MENA region is shaped by a combination of geopolitical shifts, regional dynamics, and local factors, that have contributed to political instability, authoritarian retrenchment, and the rise of non-state actors. The United States must recalibrate its approach to the region, prioritizing support for democratic reforms, human rights, and inclusive governance, while also addressing security threats and advancing its strategic interests. By doing so, the United States can contribute to the promotion of democracy and stability in the MENA region and uphold its commitment to democratic values and principles

REFERENCES

Brown, N. J. "The democratization dilemma: The United States and Middle East political reform." Brookings Institution Press, 2018.

Marc. L. "The Arab uprisings: The unfinished revolutions of the new Middle East." Public Affairs, 2022.

Raymond, H. and Ehteshami.A. "The Foreign Policies of Middle East States." Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022.

Posusney, M. P, and Angrist. M. P. "Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and resistance." Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023.

Joel, B. and Vairel, F. eds. "Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa." Stanford University Press, 2021.

Steven, H. and Leenders, R. eds. "Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran." Stanford University Press, 2023.

Larry. D. "Facing up to the democratic recession." Journal of Democracy 26, no. 1 (2021): 141-155.

Marina, O. and Carothers, T. eds. "Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023.

Ellen. L. "Structuring conflict in the Arab world: incumbents, opponents, and institutions." Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Huntington, S. P. "The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century." University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.