ARABS LOVE DEMOCRACY, BUT DO WE?

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Surely all those dictators are proof that Arabs don't love democracy the way we Westerners do, that they are culturally, religiously and perhaps congenitally attracted to tyrannical strongmen as leaders.

This widely held view will be difficult to sustain here now that wall-to-wall TV coverage of the Egyptian (and Tunisian) uprisings has exposed the truth: Arabs don't like tyrants any more than we do.
In fact, they love democracy — so much so that hundreds of thousands of them have risked serious harm by taking to the streets to defy a regime that for decades has been a leading practitioner of repression and torture of dissidents.

Another truth has also inadvertently slipped out of the bag: while hated by their own people, Arab dictators have managed to hold onto power because of our support — that is, the support of Western governments, particularly the United States, which provides $1.3 billion in annual military aid to Egypt.

It turns out that some of the most horrific Middle Eastern despots — notably those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia — are there because the West has propped them up, over the fierce opposition and suffering of their own people. If we want to pinpoint responsibility for the lack of democracy in the Middle East, we might stop trying to find defects in the Arab soul and start looking in the mirror.

The fact that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has been kept in power by the West partly explains why he is so hated by his own people. In addition to being a tyrant, he's seen as an American lackey, willing to submit to U.S. demands that he support Israel's occupation of Palestinian land.

As prominent Israeli journalist Uri Avnery put it last week: "In Arab culture, nothing is more important than honour. People can suffer deprivation, but they will not stand humiliation. Yet what every young Arab from Morocco to Oman saw daily was his leaders humiliating themselves, forsaking their Palestinian brothers in order to gain favour and money from America."

A democratically elected government in Cairo would be unlikely to repudiate Egypt's peace treaty

with Israel.

But it would almost certainly stop collaborating with Israel in enforcing the brutal Israeli blockade of Gaza — a collaboration that is extremely unpopular in Egypt.

"Egyptian policy would be set in Cairo rather than in Washington and Tel Aviv," noted Adam Shatz, a senior editor at the London Review of Books.

A democratic Egyptian government would likely resemble the government of Turkey, which is Islamic, democratic and independent of Washington.

While Washington is clearly struggling with all this, fearful of looking hypocritical in not fully supporting the democracy movement, there seems to be no such fear in Ottawa.

Last week, even as Barack Obama called for transition "now," Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon indicated Canada was willing to go along with Mubarak's sluggish timetable for reform.

Once again, the Harper government was signalling that support for Israel — and therefore Israeli ally Mubarak — will come before any other principle, including support for democracy.

For years we've been told that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East. What we weren't told is that Western leaders, including Harper, have been trying to keep it that way.

Linda McQuaig's column appears every other week. lmcquaig@sympatico.ca