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Three proposals for the Rabat meeting

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In the original paper presented by Arab civil society groups to the G8 meeting in New York earlier this year, three imperatives were identified which required some response from G8 ministers and any Arab or Middle Eastern government that was ready for meaningful reform. Neither acknowledgment of these imperatives by the concerned governments, let alone support, was forthcoming.

As officials gather in Rabat, Morocco, for a meeting of the Forum of the Future, the framework established at the G8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia, for an ongoing dialogue between G8 members and regional governments on such issues as reform, one should, again, expect much resistance. However, the imperatives defined by the civil society groups will persist as priority demands in the Middle East, which is why they are worth repeating.

What are these three imperatives?

First, the freedom imperative. This focuses on the release of prisoners of opinion or conscience (PoCs), the support for their families during their incarceration, and their rehabilitation and support as leaders of opinion if they so wish after they are released. The efforts of some civil society groups have led to the establishment of an initial list of such prisoners of opinion, as well as a principled manifesto for their release, together with calls for the protection of freedom of expression, especially freedom of the press and freedom of association, especially of political parties.

Since the New York meeting, few prisoners have been released and more have been put in jail or physically threatened (in Bahrain, Lebanon, Israel, Saudi Arabia). News reports from Syria this week suggested there had been a release of PoCs, even though the full impact of this has yet to be gauged, while pressure continues to build up from former PoCs, and from relatives of PoCs who remain in prison.

As a result of this, we propose that the participants in the Rabat meeting adopt the freedom imperative and establish a G8 agency and fund dedicated to PoCs.

Second, the democratic imperative. Unless there is a peaceful, non-violent change in Middle East governments, a decisive element of reform will be missing. Instead, since the New York paper, both in Lebanon and Tunisia presidents have seen their terms extended through clearly undemocratic, unconstitutional means. At the same time, both in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, which among other things demands a Syrian pullout from Lebanon, and in the subsequent report of the UN secretary general, the need for presidential change was consecrated, for the first time, as an international request couched in Security Council language.

The G8 and willing governments in the Middle East should adopt this symbolic change as a precedent, and work with civil society to make it a rule rather than an exception in the region.

As action, we propose that the creation of an observatory on presidential alternation (it could be called an elections observatory) be announced in Rabat, as well as a concomitant Arab-international task force for free and fair elections. Middle East civil society members can provide much of the manpower for this task force, and deploy it in Iraq and Palestine as early as January 2005.

Third, the justice imperative. This requires the establishment of mechanisms that bring to justice those Arab or Middle Eastern leaders who are responsible for egregious violations of human rights, notably crimes against humanity - namely Saddam Hussein, Moammar al-Gadhafi, Ariel Sharon and the rulers of Sudan. Each case has its own specificities, but in all four cases, the G8 is lagging far behind the demands of Arab and Middle Eastern civil society.

In this context, we should consider the following. The trial of Saddam Hussein is afoot, and we should envisage together how more serious regional and international input can lessen the imprimatur of victor's justice in that historic trial.

In the case of Moammar al-Gadhafi (who was indicted in August 2004 by the Lebanese prosecutor-general for his involvement in the disappearance of the Lebanese Shiite leader Imam Musa Sadr), the normalization underway with Western leaders openly contradicts the justice imperative by endorsing a return to the medieval practice in the West of accepting blood money, which the Libyan regime paid out to compensate the victims of airliners that it was responsible for downing.

In the case of Ariel Sharon, the American government openly undermined his indictment and trial in Belgium last year, a tragic development for the justice imperative. Putting Sharon's established crimes against humanity on the international agenda remains central for peace in the Middle East.

In Sudan, Arab democratic civil society leaders demanded in July 2004 judicial accountability for those responsible for the flight of over one million people from the Darfur region, and the consequent death of what is estimated to be nearly 100,000 innocent Sudanese. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch support this demand.

In terms of action, the civil society groups propose that participants in the Rabat gathering acknowledge the need for the justice imperative, even as more practical measures should accompany all four prima facie cases.

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