

## Opinion &amp; Analysis

## Mideast presidential races paradox of democracy

Although elections are the basis of democracy, the results sometimes do not always reflect the will of the people. A question mark hangs over the will of people in regard to elections in such divided countries as Syria, which is racked by civil war, and insurgency-challenged Ukraine.

The legitimacy of the presidential elections recently held in those two countries is linked inexorably to the dynamics of international politics. After Syrian President Bashar Assad's reelection earlier this month, Russia and Iran said it was a manifestation of the prevailing will of the Syrian people, an observation dismissed by the United States and the European Union.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is adamant that the election of Petro Poroshenko as Ukraine's new president is the outcome of Western collusion and an undemocratic campaign to deprive pro-Russian residents in eastern Ukraine of the right to political participation.

In the methods used, the choice of presidents in Ukraine and Syria as well as in Egypt, where retired Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sissi emerged as its new president, followed basic democratic procedures—elections. However, what Japan and Western countries perceive as the principles and essence of democracy have been completely compromised through elections in those countries.

Nonetheless, in Ukraine, Syria and Egypt there exists a political reality that their people want social instability and disorder to end. The election of such leaders as Sissi, a former defense minister, should not necessarily be simply regarded as an extraordinary event when we consider prevailing public sentiment.

In Syria, the country where the Arab Spring uprisings were expected to successfully climax with a people's revolt against Assad, the voter turnout in the June 3 presidential election stood at 73.4 percent with 88.7 percent of the ballots going to the incumbent leader.

In Lebanon that hosts hordes of Syrian refugees, a large number of them cast ballots at the Syrian Embassy in Beirut. Thousands of refugees crossed from Lebanon into Syria to vote without losing their refugee status, as the Lebanese government offered a one-off measure to allow them to make a 24-hour round-trip to their homeland. This seems to indicate that an increasing number of Syrians are now disenchanted with antigovernment rebels and even expect the Assad regime to restore peace and order in the country.

In Syria, about 85 percent of the population now live in government-controlled areas. This indicates that a great majority of Syrians have an increasingly strong aversion toward both domestic and external rebels who claim to be the national resistance, but in fact are a component of Al-Qaida terrorism aiming to set up an Islamist state. The majority of the Syrians also seem to be turning their backs on the ruthless offensives of rebel groups to expand areas under their control.



INSIGHTS  
into the  
WORLD

By Masayuki Yamauchi

### Dogmatic majoritarianism

The Russian Federation and Ukraine—both of which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union—have one thing in common, as do the Arab republics. Their presidential elections—in which, Boris Yeltsin and Putin emerged as winners in Russia, Mohammed Morsi in Egypt and Assad in Syria—apparently complied with democratic procedures. But their victories actually came thanks to authoritarianism that gives no room for pluralism. In other words, their leaderships tend to fall into a dogmatic state of “majoritarianism,” believing the support by a majority of the electorate means they have an omnipotent governing mandate.

Until Morsi was toppled on June 30 last year, he and his Muslim Brotherhood organization kept emphasizing the legitimacy of his presidency, saying he had been democratically elected, while they prepared to craft what they called a democratic constitution to declare the establishment of an Islamist state. However, they showed no tolerance for secular citizens' rights and the separation of church and state and no respect for the freedom of religion for Coptic Christians.

It is strange that the Muslim Brotherhood released the so-called Brussels Document on May 9, arguing that Egypt now should ensure “human security” as a top priority and calling for the restoration of the democratic process. The

organization has been trying to capitalize on the vehement attitude of the United States and the EU to press for democratization. The Brussels Document indicates that the Muslim Brotherhood, which has ruled out the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion, chose the Belgian capital, home to the headquarters of the EU, for announcing the document in an attempt to impress the Western public that it is the true democratic leader in Egypt. The document, however, made no mention of the fact that the organization keeps stirring up unrest by resorting to terrorist attacks and violence.

In Turkey, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, is tipped to run for president this summer. Against the backdrop of a series of election wins to date, he and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) seem to have become so confident that the party has adopted its version of a democratic process that places importance on majoritarianism rather than pluralism.

Despite the pressure U.S. President Barack Obama and the EU exert on the Middle East for the democratization of presidential and parliamentary elections, leaderships in the region are likely to seek popular votes only to pursue majoritarianism. Of the Arab republics, Iraq, which now appears to be on the brink of a civil war, may be the closest to achieving democracy, as it has held various elections in recent years. However, Iraq's ruling camp has shown a tendency to go along the majoritarianism path rather than accept pluralism. When the country was under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, the Sunni minority controlled the Shiite majority and the Sunni Kurdish minority. Now, the Sunni people complain that the Shiites repress them as the election results have turned in favor of the Shiites.

### Realism of Arab politics

A Latin proverb says in effect that the party that garners the support of many people is wise and full of common sense. This idea is virtually absent in Arab countries of today, where an individual's right to vote according to conscience tend to be restrained by religious and ethnic affiliation. Indeed, pluralism—an environment where a majority-to-minority shift or vice versa occur—is highly unlikely to take root in the Arab world.

For politics to function properly, society has to accept the concept that the majority group in parliament or a similar governing body is entitled to represent the interests and consensus of the entire nation. In this connection, it is noteworthy that the

notion that the decisions by the majority bind the minority is compatible with the *ijma*, or consensus, as a third source of Islamic jurisprudence for Sunnis. Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood might have moved to revise the Egyptian Constitution by regarding the results of the 2012 presidential election as the highest form of an *ijma* verdict.

However, the way Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood interpreted Muslim law to justify their move toward a constitutional revision for setting up an Islamist state ran counter to the will of most of the Egyptian people. Egyptians rose up to oust Morsi from his post and rally behind Sissi in pursuit of political stability and the restoration of public order—both indispensable for Egypt's economic development. Behind this shift of support was the lesson Egyptian society learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, where the democratic system transplanted by the West has become dysfunctional and terrorism remains rampant.

In Syria, rebels backed by Saudi Arabia are likely to abandon their original ambition to establish a provisional government and, instead, seek to share power with the Assad regime while continuing to confront Al-Qaida affiliates.

Incidentally, the Free Egyptian Army, a rebel group formed by extremist members of the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood, among others, aiming to overthrow the Egyptian government, is said to have been undertaking military training in Libya. If this rebel force becomes as active as the Free Syrian Army that has been fighting the Assad regime, any confusion in Egypt may lead to powerful foreign terrorist groups embarking on an armed revolt within the country, as in the case of Syria.

By rejecting the Muslim Brotherhood and, instead, voting for Sissi in the presidential election, Egyptians presumably expect the new president to serve as “a wise leader who knows how he should hold consultations [with his people]” as Umar, the Second Caliph, put it.

Regardless, there are no signs that those who were filled with hope and then with despair by the Arab Spring will be able to live happy lives.

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Yamauchi, a professor at Meiji University and a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, specializes in modern Islamic and Middle Eastern history and international relations.