

From Kuwait to Algiers, A New Political Openness

By Eric Goldstein

NEW YORK — Although President Saddam Hussein of Iraq may be the Arab leader most in the news these days, his brand of defiant despotism is increasingly out of step with the rest of the region. As the approaching elections in Kuwait, Algeria and Tunisia illustrate, many Arab governments are tolerating independent political activity to an extent unknown in recent years.

The pro-democracy movement in Kuwait sprung to life about six months ago, around the time that Jordan was holding its first parliamentary elections in 22 years. Since then, Kuwaitis have been organizing demonstrations and meetings to demand an end to press censorship and the return of Kuwait's lively national parliament, which the emir disbanded in 1986 at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, on the grounds that a closing of national ranks was needed.

The emir recently announced elections in June for an interim assembly. This failed to satisfy the pro-democracy movement, which said it would boycott the vote to press its demand that parliament be reconvened.

Last fall, Jordanians elected a wide array of candidates, including leftists and conservative Muslims, to represent them. Since the campaign, Amman has loosened its grip on the press, allowing policies to be debated and blacklisted journalists to return to work. Martial law, in effect since 1967, has been suspended and nearly all political prisoners freed.

The municipal elections in Tunisia and Algeria, scheduled respectively for June 10 and June 12, are noteworthy because of the active opposition confronting the ruling parties. These are Algeria's first free elections since independence, and at least 10 recently formed parties of various tendencies are running candidates.

In Tunisia, three leftist parties, in-

cluding the Communist Party, recently adopted a coalition platform for the contest, charging that the ruling party's "monopoly on power" was largely responsible "for an artificial bipolarization" between the ruling party and the country's leading Islamic movement. The opposition boycotted the last municipal elections, five years ago.

Both North African countries have been undergoing extensive reforms, Tunisia since Zine Abidine ben Ali relieved President Habib Bourguiba in 1987, and Algeria since 1988, when the country was rocked by the most extensive riots since independence. In both countries, hundreds of political prisoners were released and several opposition parties legalized.

Egypt has had opposition parties and a vociferous press for several years now; their relentless criticism of the unpopular hard-line interior minister, Zaki Badr, contributed to his ouster in January.

The upheaval in Eastern Europe has surely fueled demands for change in the Arab world. The *intifada* has also provided inspiration, with its powerful images of an Arab people willing to sacrifice so much in the quest for national and political rights.

The flow of information across borders has played a key role. Citizens of countries with no independent news media tune in to Arabic newscasts on the BBC, the Voice of America and the French-run Radio Monte Carlo. Residents of North African cities receive European television.

The fear of instability has also been an impetus for governments to liberalize. Facing economic crisis and Islamic radicalism, the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Algeria are gambling that wider political space will allow discontent to be expressed within the system, rather than in underground movements and violence.



This path is risky. Some groups, religious extremists in particular, will naturally exploit the more tolerant atmosphere to try to impose their intolerance on others. But governments that have watched these groups thrive in the absence of legal opposition political activity are betting that pluralism, in the long run, is the safer way.

So far, the openings have been partial and fragile. No genuine multiparty democracy has emerged since the collapse of Lebanon; no Arab ruler has been voted out of office. One state, Morocco, has an independently owned television station. President Hosni Mubarak regularly renews the state of emergency in Egypt, under which hundreds of religious activists are held without charge each year, many of them tortured. In Egypt and Tunisia, the political machinery is rigged in favor of the ruling party. In Jordan and Algeria, many reforms have yet to be signed into law.

Sudan grimly illustrates the reversibility of reform. Four years ago, it boasted the freest political culture in the Arab world; today, agents of the latest junta engage in mass arrests and torture of suspected opponents.

No such backsliding is possible in Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, because they have had no meaningful

reforms to begin with. For years, even mild political dissent has been suppressed, and detainees routinely tortured. And in North Africa, Morocco and Libya have yet to follow their liberalizing neighbors.

But if the region is not on the verge of an East European-style transformation, the currents of change are real. On March 8, the day the trial of the journalist Farzad Bazoft began in a closed Revolutionary Court in Baghdad, a more encouraging event was taking place in Tunis: The Arab Organization for Human Rights, or AOHR, was holding its general assembly.

Seven years ago, this independent association had to convene its inaugural assembly in Cyprus because no Arab government would permit such a meeting on its soil. For years, Arab governments foiled attempts by the AOHR to win consultative status at the United Nations. Last year, the AOHR was finally accepted, and this month it gathered for the first time in a major Arab capital. At the meeting, the AOHR celebrated the legalization of affiliates in Jordan and Yemen. Local human rights groups also investigate and criticize abuses by their governments in Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon.

Iraq, needless to say, is not one of these countries. Like Ceausescu's Romania, it is a police state rife with intelligence agents and informers. In the hope of buying off dissent, President Hussein has tried to ensure the material needs of his people.

But as the emir of Kuwait has discovered, overflowing supermarkets do not always prevent people from demanding political rights. After what has happened in Eastern Europe, and what is beginning to happen in some Arab countries, even Iraq no longer looks impervious to change.

The writer is research director for Middle East Watch, a human rights group. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.