

'Negative democratic gap' serves as predictor for instability such as in Egypt: researchers

February 1 2011

Research carried out at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem shows that it was possible already in 2008 to predict that countries such as Egypt and Iran were headed for dangerous periods of instability because of citizens' demands for democratization.

The researchers were able to make this observation on the basis of a "democratic gap" scale of measurement between the level of freedom existing and the desire of citizens for more freedom, which was analyzed in about 90 countries around the world.

In their research, Prof. Tamir Sheafer and Dr. Shaul Shenhav from the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University used this scale to help explain the current violent protests in Egypt and the protests seen in Iran after the last elections there, while similar events did not happen in other non-democratic nations from which they gathered data in 2008.

Unlike other researchers who have singled out the religious element in conflicts or the lack of [democracy](#) alone as the central causes of instability, Sheafer and Shenhav have stressed the need to examine on a scale the freedom that citizens have striven for and the level of democracy granted to them. They found that in states such as Egypt, Iran, Morocco, [Saudi Arabia](#), Thailand, Belarus and China there is a "negative democratic gap" -- that is that the citizens are granted less democracy than their expectations. In such circumstances, say the researchers, the chances of undermining the existing rule is increased.

On the other hand, they say, there are other states, such as Jordan, Algeria and Malaysia, in which there is a "positive democratic gap." In those countries, the level of democracy accorded to the citizens (even though the actual regimes cannot be described as democratic) is nevertheless higher than the aspirations of the citizens. In such a situation, there is a lesser danger of instability.

The research of Sheaffer and Shenhav, which is to be published soon in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, measured for the first time this element of the positive or negative gap between the democratic expectations of the public and the actual situation in 90 countries.

Political scientists over the years focused on the level of incongruence between democratic desires among the public and in political institutions in a country as an important indication of political instability. The theory was that the greater the incongruence, the greater the instability.

Sheaffer and Shenhav have refined that theory so that it places less emphasis on the size of that growth but rather on whether or not there exists at all the "negative democratic gap" in which [citizens](#) might take to the streets to protest. In making this judgment, the researchers based their approach on the work of public decision making done in past years by former Hebrew University Professors Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tverski and for which Kahneman won a Nobel Prize in economics.

The researchers caution that one must use their model with caution, since there are many other factors involved in issues of instability, such as the way in which regimes deal with attempts to undermine their rule, economic conditions, and processes towards greater democratization that the regimes might be willing to institute.

Provided by Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Citation: 'Negative democratic gap' serves as predictor for instability such as in Egypt: researchers (2011, February 1) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-02-negative-democratic-gap-predictor-instability.html>

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