The concept of democracy has one meaning – I believe the true and original meaning – for which I hold a high value well worth fighting for. Democracy has not proved to be a certain protection against tyranny and oppression, as once it was hoped. Nevertheless, as a convention which enables any majority to rid itself of government it does not like, democracy is of inestimable value. 3

I accord institutions only secondary influence over the destiny of men. I am thoroughly convinced that political societies are not what their laws make them but what they are prepared in advance to be by the feelings, the beliefs, the ideas, the habits of heart and mind of the men who compose them. 2

At the height of their civilization, the Arabs translated all Greek philosophical and scientific books. They translated Aristotle and Plato, yet neglected the concept of democracy, that is to say, the concept of democratic organization. They had no need for it because it is alien to the Arab/Muslim mentality. The citizen himself does not feel the need for choice, whereas he has a keen sense of justice. He needs justice with regard to the police, judges and rulers. These are elements of Arab/Muslim mentality, from God's word to Ibn Khaldun, who never spoke about freedom, but laid the stress on justice, which he considered one of the pillars of a thriving society. 3

The last statement above, by a senior Tunisian official, highlights one of the major problems that exists in discussing the role of democracy in North Africa. Many people there do not see the issue of democracy as such as the core problem they face in the national or regional political arena. Instead, they are more concerned over issues of justice and legitimacy, in the sense that government should not be seen as an alien imposition on a
resentful population and that the arbitrary nature of state power should be tamed by the subjugation of government to accepted legal precept.

Yet, the current atmosphere of the 'end of history', with its promise of a New World Order with universal political and economic structures based on Western views of liberal representative democracy and universal integration into an economic order based on the operations of the free market, also seems to many to be a threat. North Africans, along with many others in the developing world, feel that they have increasingly little choice over the political system they must now adopt, whatever national preferences may be. Western triumphalism, in the aftermath of the war against the Saddam Hussain regime because of the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, leaves little room for dissent, particularly when it is backed up by the threat of economic sanction, as expressed through the concept of 'conditionality' and a belief in an inevitable 'clash of civilizations'.

This is a great pity, however, for it discredits democratic political systems irrespective of their relevance to or suitability for the current political scene there. There is, therefore, a growing prejudice against the democratic option – at least in those terms in which it is conceived in the developed world – whatever its innate value may be for the growth of more satisfactory and legitimate political systems inside North Africa. There is also growing resentment that indigenous Islamic, Arab and even North African political traditions are automatically thrust aside by policymakers in the developed world when they come to evaluate the political situation there. The danger of such an approach is that, ultimately, North Africans may simply reject the democratic option, however it is presented, on the grounds that it is simply alien and therefore undesirable, whatever its real utility may be, despite the widespread yearning for responsible, legitimate and representative government throughout the region.

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRADITION

We tend to forget, however, that democracy was also not the automatic political option in the Anglo-Saxon world – where its modern forms were developed – when new systems of government were sought at the end of the eighteenth century and during