



Arab Spring and the Changing Contours of Arab Politics

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Introduction

It has been nearly two years since the self-immolation by a Tunisian vendor in December 2010 set the Arab world in turmoil. The situation in the region has been quite fluid since and unfolding in an unpredictable, different and subtle manner. The future is laden with uncertainty and ambiguity. This turmoil is symptomatic of deep social, economic and political discontent in the region.

The democratic wave has swept across the Arab world where political protest and demonstration are reigning the streets. These events have introduced a new political discourse with liberal ideas and democratic forces are emerging. A multi-party system is evolving and new political alliances are also taking shape in the region. U.S. President Barack Obama has described the present scenario in the following words, “Across the region, those rights that we had taken for granted are being claimed with joy by those who are prying to loosen the grip of an iron fist”.ⁱ Similar sentiments have been expressed by an Arab woman, Goufran Mansour when she said, “These days it seems good to be an Arab”.ⁱⁱ

In recent months, the Arab world has experienced profound changes, some of them unprecedented in nature, with far reaching impact. In countries like Egypt and Tunisia, a successful political transition has taken place while Syria is still fuming under the impact of

sectarian conflict. The situation in Libya and Yemen seems to be stable after the election but not devoid of frequent tribal and ethnic conflict. To date it is unclear where this turbulence in the region is heading and what trajectory it will follow. But one thing is obvious, recent developments have changed the face of the Arab world.

Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco

The Arab Spring has transformed the politics in the Arab world in many ways bringing new political actors. The Islamists have emerged as a key set of political actors in Egypt and Tunisia. It can justifiably be claimed that they have been the real gainers of this meticulous socio-political transformation. In Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party, a political arm of Muslim Brotherhood (MBH), the region's oldest and most influential Islamic movement, has made a clean sweep in the Parliamentary elections. For the first time in its history, an Islamist President has entered the royal palace of Egypt. Unlike the Islamists, the liberals failed to make any significant gain in the first ever fair election. This may be attributed to their attitude of apathy or their co-option by the previous establishment.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the beginning of the revolt, the army had sided completely with the revolutionaries but once Hosni Mubarak, the former President of the country, was sidelined, the army was not keen to transfer power to the democratically elected government. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) dissolved the Parliament on June 14 and deprived the President of all his executive authority through an addendum to the constitution. Commenting on the move, one member of the Advisory Council appointed by SCAF, Mona Makram Ebeid said, "They are everywhere even though you cannot see them".^{iv} Having seen the enmity of the army towards the Islamists, some analysts were of the opinion that Egyptian military was acting like a *Junta*, and few had even expressed apprehension of the repetition of Algeria of 1992.^v

But the sudden removal of Field Marshal Tantavi from the position of defense minister, (he was also the Commander of the armed forces and Chief of the SCAF) by a Presidential decree in the second week of August, 2012 has paved the way to end the present phase of inter-institutional collusion and give substantial authority to the elected government.^{vi} The departure also reflects its inability to bear the brunt of the anger of the people. The retirement of the army from the helm of the affairs also brings to an end the era of ruler-army nexus in Egypt. It is not only MBH, which gained ground but there are other Islamic groups too, like the Salafists which

have risen to a considerable position now dominating national politics. So far, the Islamists have adopted the policy of adaptation and accommodation.

The emergence of several liberal parties like Third Current, Free Egyptian Party, Egyptian Social Democratic Party and the Tagammu Party in Egypt is suggestive of the fact that Egypt is experiencing the culture of political plurality and evolution of a multi-party system which had been non-existent for decades. In a recent protest, a group of opposition parties gave the call, “Egypt is for all the Egyptians and not for only one group”.^{vii}

In Tunisia, the formation of a new constitution is already under way after the conclusion of election for the Constituent Assembly in October 2011. Like Egypt, Tunisia too witnessed the advent of the Islamists in the power struggle after decades of alienation and suppression. Tunisia was the first country to witness regime change as the Islamists won the majority of votes. It was a dramatic shift for the Islamic An-Nahda party, an outlawed body for several years, which suffered suppressions at the hand of previous autocratic regimes. The leader of An-Nahda, Mohammad Ghannouchi, was in exile for more than two decades.

Hamadi Jebali, Secretary General of An-Nahda, is the new Prime Minister and now the Islamic party is working in close alliance with other secularist forces like Progressive Democratic Party. At present their political blueprint is devoid of any Islamic rhetoric and it is concentrating more on the model of civic governance. The new political dispensation will lay the foundation of a new Tunisia. An-Nahda is aware of the questions surrounding their ability to govern Tunisia. In trying to reassure the people who are apprehensive of An-Nahda, its leader Mohammad Ghannushi said, “We are serious about our projects in establishing democracy and assuring development...the people who do not trust us, it’s normal, because for 22 years they have been subject to propaganda from Ben-Ali which discredited us, and made people fearful of us”.^{viii}

Similarly, in the recent Moroccan election too, the Islamist captured the majority of seats and the King nominated Abdelilah Benkirane, an Islamist figure, as Prime Minister. Now it is to be seen how the monarchy deals with these new Islamists forces in Morocco and how they are accommodated in national politics. The King has already initiated a major political reform promising empowerment of the people.

In essence, the movement of Islamic forces at the helm of the affairs has changed the face of the political landscape in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. It is believed that Islamic political impulses will dominate the political scenario for some time to come. However, the new wave of Islamism will have to accommodate other voices too. Moreover, it will not be easy for them to govern and satisfy the aspirations of the millions of masses.

Libya and Yemen

The political situation in Libya and Yemen is completely different from Tunisia and Egypt. It was the departure of Colonel Gaddafi after the intervention of the NATO that set the ground for democratic process in the country. In July, 2012, the election was held for the General National Congress and it was the first democratic election in Libya in half a century. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, in the Libyan election, liberal forces emerged victorious. The poor performance of the Islamists may be attributed to the traditional Sufi character of Libyan Islam and people's non-inclination towards Islamic brand of politics. Moreover, during Gaddafi's regime, most of Islamists were behind bars and were not organised like MBH of Egypt or An-Nahda of Tunisia.^{ix}

The democratic process in Libya has failed to bring about the political stability such as the one in Egypt or Tunisia. The country has become more fragile and vulnerable. There are frequent clashes in different parts of the country between remnant loyalists of Gaddafi and revolutionaries. It is also the tribal nature of society in Libya that is causing fragmentation and disruption of the social fabrics. Libyan society is now horizontally as well as vertically fragmented and neo-tribalism has taken over the old national identity and loyalty.

After the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mediated a deal between the opposition groups and President Abdullah Saleh to leave the Presidentship, Yemen went through the Presidential election in February 2012 and acting President Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi was elected as the President. Here too, the election process has failed to unite a society that is fragmented by cultural and tribal loyalties. The boycott of the election by Houthis, an insurgent Shiite group, reflects the political division in Yemen and possibility of trouble in future. New governance has failed to rein in the new resurgent groups operating in the name of north-south and sectarian entity.

Bahrain and other Gulf countries

During the Arab Spring, the old sectarian fault lines between Shiites and Sunnis had revived in Bahrain. The situation in Bahrain can be juxtaposed to that in Syria where minority Sunnis rule over majority Shiites. In Bahrain, it was GCC under the leadership of Saudi Arabia which suppressed the revolt. Moreover, Bahrain has become a battle ground of influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia. At present, the situation remains calm but one cannot rule out the possibility of recurrence in the near future because of the volatile nature of the region. Moreover, Iran may try to capitalise on the increased sectarian tension.

Saudi Arabia is also passing through 'low level' sectarian conflict where the Shiite minority in the eastern part is making frequent protests demanding political rights and freedom. In Jordan, frequent and small scale protests and unrest continue to keep the regime off the balance. A few countries like Algeria, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Morocco have emerged unscathed from the Arab Spring after witnessing unrest in varying degrees, but these governments do not seem to be seriously shaken.

Syria: A Zone of Conflict

Barring Syria, nearly every country affected by the Arab Spring is gradually moving towards stability. The bloodiest outcome of the Arab Spring has been the continuous war in Syria and the U.N. has equated the situation with a 'civil war'. Syria is prone to Sunni-Alawite conflict but the Arab Spring has heightened the crisis. According to U.N. estimates, more than 20,000 people have been killed so far and millions rendered homeless seeking refuge in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.

Syria continues to witness violent clashes between the regime and the rebels reflecting the deep seated hatred between the Sunni majority and the ruling Alwite minority. There are reports of foreign mercenaries joining the rebellion group. Atwan, a columnist with a London Arabic Daily Alqudsal-Arabi, has said that Syria has become the scene of an international conflict.^x So far, no effort, including the U.N.-Arab League Mission led by Kofi Annan, former U.N. Secretary- General, has succeeded to contain this strife. Even the new U.N.-Arab League Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi admitted that he was not confident he would be able to end the 17- month old conflict.^{xi}

Role of External Players

The conflict in Syria, Libya and Bahrain has seen external intervention from the very beginning. United States has been exerting all sorts of pressures on President Assad to step down. It is in constant negotiations with other regional actors like Turkey and Saudi Arabia to find a way out for the exit of President Assad. But unlike Britain and France, U.S. seems to be least eager of any external intervention and, if it ever happens, U.S would perhaps take no lead. On the other hand, France and Britain see all the remedies in the external intervention alone akin to what had happened in Libya. British Foreign Secretary, William Hague has said that governments around the world have the responsibility to rebuild the efforts to stop Assad regime's despicable campaign of terror.^{xii} European Union (E.U.) has called upon Turkey to intervene militarily in Syria, while the U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton has called for imposing a no-fly zone over some parts of Syria.^{xiii} To the contrary, Russia and China have not only rebuffed the idea of foreign intervention but so far vetoed three UNSC resolutions seeking condemnation of Syria. Russia's current cordiality with Syria can be read in the legacy of cold war era when Syria belonged to the Russian camp while the China's position is more guided by its politico-strategic attitude vis-à-vis the west.

Regionally, Turkey was the first country to identify with the Arab Spring and the victory of the Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia has further bolstered Turkish influence. Turkey has been constantly calling upon Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to step down. It has also hosted a series of meeting of the Syrian National Council, a Syrian opposition group. Not only that, it has imposed an economic sanctions against Syria and placed thousands of Syrian refugees on Turkish-Syrian border under its full protection. Addressing his party members, Turkish Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan said that the regime in Syria had now become a terrorist state.^{xiv} Reacting sternly to the policy of intervention by Turkey and other western powers, President Assad has warned that there will be 10 Afghanistans if the West tries to intervene in the internal affairs of the country and the fall of Syria will set the region on fire.^{xv}

Conversely, Iran is extending all patronage to the regime in its fight against the revolutionaries. Iran has signed a free trade pact with Syria for the purpose of rescuing the Syrian economy. Reacting to the mounting Iranian support to Syria, Abid Manaa, a Kuwaiti political analyst told Alquds-Alarabi that Iran was a single threat to the Gulf security.^{xvi} Hezbollah, the

strongest political face of Shiites in the region, is extending all support to Syria. The role of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Yemen and Libya respectively are suggestive of the fact that there is an overt external intervention in the region.

Of late, a contact group was formed at the behest of Egyptian President Morsi comprising Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabi to resolve the Syrian crisis. A foreign-ministerial level meeting of the contact group held in Cairo on 18 September, 2012 in which Iran suggested that a team of observers be dispatched to crisis-hit Syria. Though it was a quartet meeting but the absence of Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia was indicative of the divergence of interests amongst the group members. After the Cairo meeting, the Egyptian foreign minister announced that the contact group would meet again on the sidelines of the next regular session of the United Nations General Assembly.^{xvii}

Impact on Israel

The most affected and the biggest loser in this phase of disorder seems to be the state of Israel. The reversal in the West Asia in general, and in Egypt in particular has weighty strategic influence for Israel. With the departure of the old regime, Israel has lost its most reliable ally in the region, i.e. Egypt. The sudden change in the political equilibrium of the region has disrupted the entire strategic layout of Israel. Israel's foremost concern is to protect the Camp David Accord, a hallmark of its peaceful existence in the region. The government of Israel is well aware that an era of 'American veto' over the regimes is gone. Egypt will never be the same for them as the outburst of the masses can no more be allowed to go unheard by any future regime.

A series of recent blasts in the Egypt-Israel pipeline zone and halting of gas supply to Israel say much about the new dynamics of the relations between two sides. It is feared that Israel may no longer enjoy the same leverage over the Arab world. But the new regime in Egypt must be careful to keep anti-Israel rhetoric from spiraling out of control. The Palestinian issue will be common to all the incumbents and it will be difficult for the new regimes to ignore it as the new democratic impulse of the masses will not allow this to happen. This is, perhaps, the impact of democratic sway in the region that bolstered the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmud Abbas to take the issue of Palestinian statehood unilaterally before the U.N. General Assembly in February 2012.

Despite these apparent difficulties in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, there still remains a silver line for Israel. Growing disunity and instability in the region, regional rivalry in form of sectarianism and political preoccupation in most of the countries might keep off some of the pressures from Israel. Israel will lose no time to take the advantage of the multi-faceted conflicts in the region to restore its position which at the moment seems to be, if not shaken, weakened.

Implications for India

The Arab Spring has evoked India's renewed interest in the West Asia, a region that constantly remains central to New Delhi's foreign policy calculus, due to the politico-historical and socio-economic linkage. Our interest and the gravity of our relationship with the Arab world even amidst the current crisis was enforced when a joint statement, issued during the visit of Indian External Affairs Minister, S. M. Krishna to Egypt on 2 March, 2012 stated, "India has robust cooperation arrangement with Arab countries and particularly with Arab League. Arab world and India share common civilizational link, common cultural values and political beliefs and enjoys strong economic ties. With these activities, we propose to strengthen India-Arab cooperation further".^{xviii}

India's interest, over the years, varied from country to country in West Asia. But the region as a whole remains of a great importance in terms of energy resources, remittances and the security of a large number of expatriates. Given the strength of our historical relationship, current events in West Asia did not force India into any great anxiety. But a stable, democratic, vibrant and secure Arab world is always in the interest of India both politically and economically. India should engage with the new regimes in the region without risking its vital interests like its relationship with Israel or Saudi Arabia. It is also worth mentioning here that India cannot lose Iran as it is our long term friend.

India has a history of supporting democracy and has always opposed the policy of external intervention. In adherence to this core principle, India has come up positively on the issue of Syria, both for the sake of policy of non-intervention and Responsibility to Protect. At the NAM Summit held recently in Iran, India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh once again reiterated that any solution to the Syrian crisis should be Syria-led alone. Any Indian instance in future should be guided by its own enlightened national interest and it will be right to keep in

mind that any move in haste or under pressure may have a severe backlash in international forums.

Conclusion:

There are new political impulses, which will dominate the Arab political scenario for some time to come. An Arab world that will emerge from the debris of the Arab Spring will be completely different. The new wave of Islamism that has hit the shore of the Arab politics will have to accommodate other political voices too. Moreover, any power vacuum in the region can derail the political trajectory and ruin the process of democracy and can pave the way for radical groups to disrupt the evolving political stability. The rise of Turkey and assertion of Iran in the changing scenario can prove to be a catalyst in the new geo-strategic symmetry that might prove to be another source of insecurity and uncertainty in the region. The presence of the old elements in post- Arab Spring political phase may turn the euphoria of Arab Spring into Arab Autumn.^{xix}

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Notes

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