



View Point

Demand for Democracy:

A new wave of change in the Arab world

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A new wave of democratic change is underway in North Africa and Middle East. It all started with the uprising in Tunisia, where President Ben Ali was driven out of power after 23 years of rule. There were strong protests over soaring unemployment and corruption. Likewise, millions of people took to streets in Egypt shouting slogans against the President Hosni Mubarak government and after eighteen days of continuous protest, he reluctantly stepped down and moved to the Red Sea resort city of Sharm-el-Sheikh. The protests inspired similar actions in many countries of the Arab world like Jordan, Syria, Yemen etc. The Tunisia repression has acted as a spark for the age old anger and dissatisfaction of the people of these countries. The people of these countries, who until now were tolerating such regimes, have decided to oppose them. The above incidents have shown the veracity of the fact that if the people unite then even the strongest of the governments, autocratic or democratic, has to bow down.

Egypt witnessed mass agitations against President Hosni Mubarak who had clung to power since 1981. The protests began with tens of thousands of people marching into the Tahrir Square in Cairo and similar protest were witnessed in other cities of Egypt demanding Mubarak's resignation and political reform. To pacify the Egyptian people, Mubarak nominated Omar Suleiman, the former intelligence chief as Vice President and invited the opposition groups including supporters of Mohammed ElBaradei, the Muslim Brotherhood and small left-wing parties, to consider their demands and to decide further course of action. Under the growing

pressure from the people, Suleiman assured that the demands of the people would be met and that Mubarak would yield some of his powers before elections in September this year. Suleiman also assured the people that a committee would be set up to study the proposed constitutional amendments and to take action against those involved in corruption. In fact, the announcement did not address the central demands of young protesters who saw themselves as the torch bearer of the movement. They were not in a mood to accept anything less than the ouster of Mubarak.

For decades, the rulers of Arab world are holding the top position without executing their political responsibilities. They are not aware of the needs and demands of the people and finally they have lost touch with their fellow citizens. As a result, large scale unemployment, poverty, corruption, uneven development and most importantly high inflation has escalated anger among the people. Experts have argued that the recent global recession which hit hard the economies of these Arab countries have further played a major role in exacerbating the socio-political tension. Likewise, Jordan, Yemen, Syria and Algeria too have witnessed the wave of democratic change which aims to reform the old political order in these countries.

However, there are certain things which can elicit a sense of unity in Arab world. These protest movements are as wide as never seen before. It is not only students, intellectuals, Islamic fundamentalist who are sustaining the protest movement, but the lawyers, teachers and bank employees too have joined. The rural population are also coming forward to join the protest after facing years of repression. Pan-Arab media like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya have acted as catalysts for making the protests as mass movements. Government controlled television is still trying to compete with these Pan-Arab media giants, but has lost its credibility. A civil society has very little say in Arab world but has also been playing a great role through Internet, blogs and forums.

The Arab crisis has also raised the economic and energy concerns of the world. Economists claimed that if the Egypt crisis did not defuse in near future, there were chances that international oil price would further rise, which was already passed at \$100 per barrel. As a result, it would have a spill-over effect on food and other commodity prices.

In the past, Western countries supported Mubarak's regime as a symbol of powerful force against Islamists and a trusted ally who supported Western interests and agendas. The US initially stood in support of Mubarak but later on, sensing the pulse of the movement, Obama administration changed its stance and criticized the use of force against peaceful protesters and demanded early settlement of the unrest. In fact, Western countries had supported the view that until election in September 2011, the power transition should be smooth in order to conduct peaceful and meaningful reform.

India had closely followed the developments in Tunisia and Egypt and supported the aspirations of the Egyptian people. In a subtle way, New Delhi had suggested that President Hosni Mubarak should step down and pave the way for a regime change in Egypt. Soon after President Mubarak stepped down, India's External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna noted:

“We welcome the decision of President Mubarak to step down in deference to the wishes of the people of Egypt. We also welcome the commitment of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to ensure a peaceful transition of power in a time bound manner to establish an open and democratic framework of governance. We are proud of our traditionally close relations with the people of Egypt and wish them peace, stability and prosperity.”

For India, there are economic repercussions of the events in Egypt. Besides importing large quantity of oil, India also imports fertilizers from this region. In that case, the developing countries like India feel anxiety over sustaining economic growth at current rate.

These unprecedented uprising in modern Arab history has sent a strong message to dictatorial and authoritarian governments all over the world. The Tunisia and Egypt uprising may be a model and an inspiration for the people of several repressive regimes like Yemen, Jordan and may be Saudi Arabia. There is a wave among the people of the world who wish to fight to make their countries democratic and to ensure rights and dignity of the peoples. Movements in Tunisia and Egypt have proved that it is citizens who have the power, not the rulers, no matter how strong or old regimes they may be.

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