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Uprisings in the Arab World: Options for GOI

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What began as a protest by a marginalized vegetable vendor in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia soon spread like wildfire and has engulfed the wider Arab world. The unfolding developments have been described as unrest, upheaval, revolution, democratic surge, popular protests, regime change, digital revolution, liberation technology, revolutionary process/movement, etc. It will take some time and some tangible results before a universally acceptable nomenclature can be applied. For now, uprising sums up the situation better.

The levels of protest and the causes underlying them are country-specific. What is relevant for a republican regime may not be applicable to a monarchy and vice-versa. Popular resentment against despotic rulers may not be applicable to countries where the rulers are still popular and do not live in caged palaces. Uneven levels of popular protests and the relative grip of the rulers highlight the peculiarity of each Arab society. There are a number of local cleavages, such as sectarian discord (Bahrain), national disharmony (Jordan) or rural-urban divide (Egypt), which have exasperated the tension and public protests. Such distinctions of individual countries cannot be ignored for the sake of the wider picture.

Despite their widespread nature and vociferous calls for democracy, the uprisings lack recognized leaders. Besides the common consensus against the rulers they also lack a clear agenda, platform, charter of demands or action plan. Yet, it is possible to look for some broad and underlying causes of the current unrest in the Arab world. What are some of the common problems faced by the Arab world today and how do they contribute to popular protest against the rulers?

Regime-State Overlap

The Arab world is unfamiliar with the regime-state differentiation; and hence, challenging the status quo entails challenging the force behind it. In the monarchical context, rulers partaking power with the ruled would mean their transformation into constitutional monarchies. Republicans have a different set of problem. For some Arab states, decolonization meant one-party rule, which eventually transcended into one-person (one family in the Syrian case) rule.

The prolonged rule of the Arab rulers was made possible by the so-called ‘stability’ that these rulers provided within their respective countries. This, in turn, enabled the outside world, Western and non-Western alike, to communicate with a single addressee to manage, maintain and strengthen bilateral relations. When Qaddafi captured power in Libya in September 1969, Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister and since then India has had nine Prime Ministers. The longevity of the Arab rulers thus provided ‘stability’ between the region and the outside world.

Rather than harping on the undemocratic nature of the Arab rulers, the international community felt content with the stability factor. If the US saw Hosni Mubarak as a dependable friend and ally, countries like India also maintained more than cordial relations with him. Like their Western counterparts, Third World leaders and intelligentsia have been equally cordial with long-serving Arab rulers. If Pakistan has a Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore, Indian universities have been bestowing *honoris causa* (honorary degree) upon visiting heads of states from the Middle East. Many leaders, opinion makers, intellectuals and academics have enjoyed the support and patronage of foreign governments and leaders without ever worrying about the ‘oppressive and suppressive’ nature of these rulers and regimes. During the Cold War years, in many countries, the patronage of the Soviets was essential for the development of Sovietology. In the post-liberalization era, the options for patronage have expanded tremendously.

Lingering Rulers

Arab rulers have tended to perceive themselves not only as the ultimate authority but also the only legitimate persons to rule, govern and even shepherd their respective countries. The idea of a ruler voluntarily relinquishing office remains alien to the Arab world. Natural deaths or assassinations seemed, till recent events in Tunisia and Egypt, to be the only accepted way to end the rule of an Arab leader. Indeed, since the end of World War II, no Arab ruler has ever voluntarily relinquished office. Most were overthrown in a coup or died in office. Monarchies were overthrown by republican regimes in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1956) and Libya (1969), while Oman (1970) and Qatar (1995) witnessed fathers being deposed by more ambitious sons. In the early years, Syrian and Iraqi rulers were changed periodically by men in uniform. While the lives of King Abdullah of Jordan (1950) and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia (1975) were cut short by assassins, other Arab monarchs died in office. Indeed, despite his debilitating stroke in November 1995, Fahd remained the King of Saudi Arabia until his death in August 2005.

With the result, even republican regimes evolved life-time presidents. Muammer Qaddafi has ruled Libya since September 1969 (over 41 years); Ben-Ali in Tunisia since November 1987; Hosni Mubarak of Egypt for three decades since November 1981; Abdullah Saleh of Yemen

since July 1978 (first as head of North Yemen and since 1990 as President of unified Yemen). If one considers the father-son duo, the Assads have ruled Syria since March 1971 or over four decades. Qaboos has ruled Oman since July 1970. The same was true for Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan who ruled the UAE for over three decades (1971-2004). Likewise, King Hussein reined over Jordan for nearly five decades (1952-1999).

Such long ruling periods come against the backdrop of an interesting demographic reality. Close to fifty per cent of the region's population is young and is under the age of 25. Hence, a vast majority of the citizens of the region have not seen, known or heard of any other ruler than the incumbent. The sense of alienation between the ruler and ruled could not be more profound.

Farcical Elections

Partly due to the popularity of the idea and partly due to international pressures, some rulers have resorted to elections to justify their continuance in office. Such legitimacy seeking exercises are often cosmetic and fraudulent. In July 2000 Bashar al-Assad secured 97.29 per cent of the valid votes cast and was elected President; this figure improved to 97.6 per cent in May 2007. The same held true for Hosni Mubarak who secured 97.1 per cent of the valid votes cast in July 1987; 96.3 per cent in October 1993; and 93.8 per cent in October 1999. In September 2005, for the first time, Mubarak faced multiple candidates but he still secured 88.58 per cent of the popular vote. Tunisian ruler Ben-Ali likewise secured 99.3 per cent of the votes cast in April 1989; 99.9 per cent in March 1994; 99.5 per cent in October 1999; 94.5 per cent in October 2004; and 89.62 per cent in October 2009. In comparison, the Algerian ruler Bouteflika was better and secured only 73.8 per cent in April 1999; 84.99 per cent in April 2004; and 90.24 per cent in April 2009.

The same story holds true for parliamentary elections. Most monarchies do not have elected representative councils and prefer to deal with nominated bodies. Those who hold periodic elections such as Egypt ensure domination of the ruling party and decimation of the rest. In the November 2010 parliamentary election, Mubarak was not ready to concede even a single seat to the opposition Muslim Brotherhood in the first round of elections. Elections in Jordan are relatively fair but are heavily loaded in favour of the Bedouins, the principal backers of the Hashemites. Through effective gerrymandering the Hashemites have sought to marginalize urban constituencies inhabited mainly by Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

Exclusive National Identity

Arab countries have failed to evolve inclusive national identities. The nation-building process has been a top-down approach and revolved around the ruling regime or elite. What began as a move towards consolidating newly formed political entities soon became exclusive and exclusionary. The nation-building process became a euphemism for ruler-centric identity formation and this, in practical terms, meant the exclusion of minorities whose identities are different from the majority and, in some cases, different from that of the ruler.

Thus, none of the countries which emerged in the Middle East in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, including modern Turkey, evolved inclusive national identities. In an

endeavour to forge internal cohesion and unity, they ignored identities that came into conflict with that of the majority or of the ruling elite. Multi-cultural and multiethnic countries came to be seen, and treated, as homogenous units. Algeria thus depicts itself as Arab much to the detriment of the native Berbers, while Bahrain is Sunni because of the ruler even though the majority population is Shia. Conscious of the political fallout, the Hashemites deny suggestions that the Jordanians of Palestinian origin constitute the majority. The situation of the non-Arab countries is not different either; Iran, Israel and Turkey also stress their exclusive Shia, Jewish and Turkish identities respectively.

This becomes problematic when territorial integration does not come with political unity or purpose. From the very beginning the political unity of some of the countries remained questionable. Driven by imperial and colonial calculations, countries were formed whereby different ethnic and religious groups were clubbed together (Lebanon and Iraq) or the same group was dispersed into different countries (Kurds). The ongoing unrest has raised questions about the territorial viability of Libya, which was formed with the integration of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan provinces. Two decades later, Yemen is yet to experience the benefits of unification. Hence, exclusive national identities have become a bane for Arab countries.

Military/Mukhabarat Domination

The Arab world is highly militarized and the survival of many rulers rests on the military and especially the notorious internal security services namely, Mukhabarat. The civil-military ratio is rather high in the Arab world. Egypt, a country of 80 million, has a security apparatus of 1.5 million. The military not only forms the power base of the rulers but also keeps the population under check. By spending an excessive amount on military modernization and upkeep, the rulers manage to keep the security establishment content and loyal. This support is essential for the prolongation of their rule.

The prolongation of many Arab rulers can be directly attributed to their military background and the vested interest that the military has in their survival; rulers of Egypt (Nasser and Mubarak), Syria (Hafiz al-Assad), Libya (Qaddafi) and Tunisia (Ben-Ali) had a strong military background. Bashar Assad is an exception as the Syrian ruler was an ophthalmologist before he succeeded his father Hafiz in 2000. Even monarchies are no different. Abdullah who became the King of Saudi Arabia in August 2005 has been the head of the powerful National Guards since its founding in 1962. The same holds true for the other Abdullah, the King of Jordan, who was trained to be an elite commando before his father switched the succession line in his favour.

The military has thus become the source of power, patronage, employment and a tool of intimidation. The departure of Ben-Ali happened because the military changed sides and decided to abandon the former military officer. The same holds true for Egypt where the military nudged the reluctant Mubarak, a former air force chief, to leave the presidential palace. The lack of military background was often seen as the primary cause for his son Gamal's failure to take the political plunge.

This ruler-military nexus comes out forcefully through the high cost of military spending in the Middle East, especially among the oil rich Arab countries. In October 2010, the US announced a \$60 billion military sale to the Gulf region spread over a 10 to 15 year period. As highlighted by the tanker war in the 1980s and the Kuwait crisis (1990-91), in times of crises the Gulf countries depend on the US for their survival. But the sophisticated weapons that these countries import are not meant to confront and overcome internal threats facing them. Their only purpose is to 'offset' the oil bill of the arms suppliers.

Disproportionate Expat Population

The oil wealth that brought prosperity to some of the Arab countries also resulted in the large scale influx of foreigners into their countries. Not only has the number been growing, the phenomenon has been changing the demographic profile, especially in the Persian Gulf region. While accurate population statistics are rare, a trend can be noticed, especially in the GCC countries. The share of expat workers in Oman stood at 24 per cent (2003); Saudi Arabia 27 per cent (2008); Kuwait 61.2 per cent (2005) and 78.8 per cent in UAE (2005). In the case of Bahrain, which has already to confront the Shia-Sunni divide, the expat population accounts for 49.3 per cent (2007). In simple terms, only one-fifth of the residents of the UAE are Emirati nationals. These demographic dynamics add to internal security concerns and fears of the ruling regimes.

The US Role

Initially there were suggestions that the Arab unrest is primarily anti-American. Until mid-March, the unrest swept countries which are seen to be closer to the US. Not that every pro-US regime has witnessed unrest (for example, Qatar and the UAE), but wherever it happened the regime is seen to be more pro-Western than necessary. Countries like Syria even attributed the absence of similar protests in their territory to their 'correct' policies, their commitment to resistance and opposition to oppression. The outbreak of violence in Syria and anti-Hezbollah protests in Lebanon has challenged this interpretation. Simmering discontent in Iran and protests in the Gaza Strip ruled by the anti-American Hamas have given a universal colour to the uprising.

The American role has an interesting twist. At one level, anti-regime demonstrations have occurred in countries which are seen to be pro-Western. At the same time, both the protestors within and supporters outside have been demanding active intervention by the US. Even those who in the past criticized the US for its democracy promotion agenda began demanding that President Barack Obama not only distance himself from the unpopular rulers but also demand their early exit.

In the past, private discontents over the state of human rights violations were sidestepped in favour of larger strategic goals. Public alienation of the rulers placed Washington in a quandary and, as happened to the Shah of Iran during the dying days of the monarchy, the US began distancing itself from the unpopular Arab rulers. American calls for dialogue became a codeword

for the ‘abandonment’ of the rulers by their erstwhile patron and significantly strengthened the opposition movements (Egypt, Tunisia and Libya).

Regime Response

Confronted by widespread public unrest, the rulers have come up with a variety of concessions, offers and pledges. Some have offered political concessions (Jordan, Oman and Yemen), while others settled for financial incentives (Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, GCC and Saudi Arabia). Political concessions by Mubarak (on Vice-presidency, Gamal and re-election) proved ineffective, while others have worked to minimize the protests. In the case of Libya, the Arab League openly demanded the enforcement of a no-fly zone that resulted in the UNSC resolution and the US-led military action. On Bahrain, the GCC, for the first time in its three-decade long history, decided to militarily intervene in support of the beleaguered regime.

Policy options for GOI

While the erstwhile authoritarianism and absolutist rule may no longer be possible, it would be naïve to expect that the Middle East will undergo a metamorphosis. There would undoubtedly be changes, greater openness, increased transparency, enhanced governance and increased popular participation. Even these changes would not be uniform and/or happen immediately. But the process would be on and the governments, especially ruling elites, would be monitored more closely by the ruled. Yet, it is extremely unlikely that the current wave of protests will transform the Middle East into an oasis of democracy. Samuel Huntington’s third wave of democracy is unlikely to sweep the region any time soon.

While individuals could demand a more liberal and people-centric platform, governments have limited space for manoeuvre. Though ideal, siding with the democratic aspirations of the Arab people is not a viable option for a state. As Morgenthau put it: “No statesman could pursue indiscriminately a policy of protecting democratic governments everywhere in the world without courting certain disaster.” Wrong moves, missteps or ideology-driven actions would bring misery for a vast majority of the Indian population.

Relaxing, increasingly transparent and reforming status quo is perhaps the maximum that one can anticipate from the current wave of unrest in the Middle East. This being so, what are the options for the Indian Government?

1. Settle for instability: At least in the short run, the endgame of the current unrest would remain unknown and uncertain. Not only would the outcomes not be uniform, most likely the results would be far less than what many had expected and hoped for. Without the emergence of a strong leader or powerful military intervention, political stability in many countries would continue to be elusive. At the same, the very factors which could provide stability would also pave the way for a fresh set of dictatorial regimes. Hence, the choices are extremely limited and unenviable.

2. Do not secularize the Middle East: The Shia-Sunni and Muslim-Christian differences in the Middle East need to be recognized. Recognizing the internal differences pluralizes the policy options.
3. Recognize the cleavages: Recognize internal differences within the region and learn appropriate lessons. The Arab-Iran tensions and Arab-Turkish differences should not be ignored and the consequences of closer Indian ties with one of the parties should be adequately considered. Just as India seeks to balance its newly found relations with Israel and its traditional support for the Palestinians, the consequences of closer ties with Iran upon Indo-Arab ties and vice-versa needs to be recognized and appreciated adequately.
4. Handle Iran carefully: GOI would have to recognize the consequences of closer ties with Iran upon its Gulf/Middle East policy. Iran would be more influential than other regional and extra-regional powers and this would be felt especially in Bahrain, Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Yet, the Iranian role would not be constructive but inflammatory in nature. Hence, India's Iran policy needs to factor in Arab fears and concerns.
5. Expat labour will continue: India's economic growth is unlikely to diminish the outflow of workers to the region and the resultant remittances. Hence, there is a need to develop contingency plans for an emergency response. Find a better way to monitor the flow of expats to the Middle East. The ECR-based data is inadequate, incomplete and misleading.
6. Evacuation is not the only option: Despite domestic political pressures, media hysteria and human concerns, the GOI needs to ask tough questions about evacuating its nationals from the troubled region. There are about 5.5 to 6.0 million Indians in the Gulf region and this poses a Herculean challenge to any large-scale evacuation. Besides logistical problems, the financial aspects need thorough scrutiny. Can there be a safe-haven within the region where Indian workers can be moved/sheltered temporarily? The GOI might consider levying special taxes upon those seeking employment in the region.
7. Middle East is vital for energy security: The Middle East will continue to be important for India's energy security. The discovery of alternative sources of energy and alternative suppliers might perhaps reduce, but not eliminate, India's dependency upon the region.
8. Need for introspection: While success has many claimants, failures and mishaps elicit familiar reactions from those who were at the helm of affairs: It happened before or after me; I was not part of this; or Things were better in my time. Such escapism would not be credible. Accountability applies also to the Mandarins, current and former.
9. Synchronize your vote and statement: Election to the UNSC and great power aspirations add a new challenge to India's Middle East policy. Hence, statements explaining/justifying Indian decisions need to be drafted carefully. Understatement is better than incorrect statements (for example, on the IAEA vote).

10. Do not sermonize: Nations are driven by interests and hence accusations of double standards would be counter-productive. Some of the friends of India are no better than Mubarak. GOI also cozies up to dictators; honours them (Nehru award to Mubarak); courts the heirs (Gamal Mubarak and Saif Qaddafi); and pursues high profile state visits (Syria). GOI needs to learn, lest such leaders become a liability in future.

11. Monitor without obsession: Closely follow how countries such as China and Pakistan are responding to the Middle Eastern development, but don't view the region through Pakistani or Chinese prism.

12. Everything is not Anti-American: The anti-American sentiments in the Middle East is significant, but don't fall into the trap and read and celebrate everything as anti-American.

13. Capitalize on soft power: India might gently persuade the Middle Eastern countries to re-examine their current exclusivist approach and seek an inclusive approach towards their citizens. Accommodating and empowering the other would significantly reduce internal tensions as well as the scope for external manipulation. The GOI should do so through cultural mores rather than political discourse.

14. Everything is not bilateral: With notable exceptions, Indian diplomats who serve in the Middle East lack a nuanced understanding of the domestic developments of the countries they serve in and are content on focusing their attention on bilateral relations. This should be remedied if India is to prepare itself for events that are independent of, and could harm, bilateral relations. Interests of major powers in international affairs aren't always neatly delineated in terms of bilateral loss and gain. If need be let the mandarins study and understand the country in question before assuming their posts.

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