

## ***DATELINE MEI***

**No. 20**

**Wednesday, 21 September 2011**

### **Syrian Stability Has Many Takers**

P R Kumaraswamy

**A**fter me deluge! This is the last line of defence for many beleaguered leaders. When their survival is at stake, leaders worldwide take refuge on the stability plank. In its dying moments, the Mubarak regime flagged the stability argument and Mubarak even promised a smooth and orderly transfer of power to an elected government to prevent Egypt from plunging into anarchy and chaos. None were convinced by his plea and he had to go.

But the Syrian case is different. Not just the regime and its supporters but also its critics and detractors harp on the stability argument. How come?

True, there are growing calls for reform. A few Arab ambassadors were recalled. Belatedly the US has stepped up its pressure and so has the European Union and its sanction mechanism. However, the daily reports of violent suppression of protests and mounting casualties have not resulted in any serious revulsion in many international capitals. Principal non-western countries, especially China, India and Russia are not ready to abandon Bashar al-Assad. Indeed, despite its long-standing animosity, Israel prefers Syrian stability over post-Assad mayhem.

Reasons are not difficult to fathom. The international community has learnt a lot since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in January. The Tunisian, Egyptian and above all Libyan examples have taught them one critical lesson: change will come only when the critical mass is against the incumbent rulers. This is also a signal for the army to switch sides.

True, when other parts were burning Syria was calm, the ruler attributed the situation to him following a correct policy in tune with the masses. Come March Assad's euphoria was belied and popular protests gripped the Arab island of stability. But while rural and far-flung areas

witnessed mass protests mostly after Friday prayers, the capital Damascus and the second largest city Aleppo remained immune and many wondered if they were seeing two different countries. Indeed there was no Tahrir Square in Damascus.

Firstly, the survival of Egypt did not rest on a single individual. The removal of Mubarak through popular protest was a setback to a particular group and not beyond. This is not the case in Syria. The Assads, the father and son duo, provided Syria something it lacked since the departure of the imperialists: STABILITY. Between 1946, two years after its independence was recognized by the French, and 1956, for example, the country had 20 different governments and four different constitutional orders. Things began to improve only in November 1970 when Hafiz al-Assad became President of Syria. Since then the country has known only two rulers, Hafiz and his son Bashar.

Second, while the army was the backbone of the Mubarak regime, it did not depend on the rulers. Once again the situation in Syria is different. The survival of the Syrian army is intrinsically linked to the survival of Assad. As with other branches of the regime, the army is dominated by the minority Alawites and the departure of the President would mean large-scale violence against the Alawite-dominated army. Hence, the army cannot follow the Egyptian example and ask the ruler to step aside. For both, it is a battle of survival, and the army is as determined as Assad to fight back.

Three, should the regime collapse then Syria would follow the footsteps of the other Ba'athist regime: Iraq. With or without external interference, a post-Assad Syria would be worse than the post-Saddam Iraq. With a number of ethnic and religious groups, each having their own grievances and complaints against the Assads, Syria could soon plunge into a civil war. There is discontent among the Kurds and majority Sunni population as the regime is seen as favouring the minority Shia and Christian communities to hold on to power.

Four, in the worst case scenario, Syria could become another Lebanon where the absence of a powerful central authority would induce neighbouring countries to capitalize on the internal strife. The troubles in Iraq could quickly spill over into Syria, especially when the autonomy of the Iraqi Kurds has been a point of envy for other Kurds in the region. A weakened Syria would be an open invitation for the Islamic Republic of Iran to consolidate its presence and influence in Lebanon. The Turkish differences and tension with Syria were only marginalized recently and could be revived if Turkey were to smell an opportunity. The interference of external players would naturally draw Israel into the picture and with the Golan Heights still under its control it would seek politico-military domination over a weakened Damascus.

Five, for decades Syria has hosted various Palestinian groups opposed not only to the peace process but also to the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Of late, Syria is the only Arab power committed to the hard-line Palestinians opposed to peace with Israel. If one excludes Iran, Syria

is the only country that hosts and supports Hamas. Any sudden change in Syria will not only orphan the Palestinians but also intensify the inter-Palestinian frictions.

Six, the opposition in Egypt earned regional and international support largely because of its peaceful nature. The presence of millions of ordinary citizens prepared to peacefully defy the powers of the state and its machinery impressed the international community. Tahrir Square symbolized the empowerment of marginalized men and women. This is not the case in Syria. Partly because of the regime's tactics and partly due to their determination, protests in Syria have been violent which has raised doubts about the motives and outcomes. There are suggestions that arms are being smuggled into the country from porous borders with Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Seven, despite half-hearted attempts of censorship and blackouts, Mubarak had ensured media coverage of public protests, especially in Tahrir Square. The international media was able to provide live coverage of the last 18 days of the regime. This, however, is not the case in Syria. Media blackout has been total and the international media, including *al-Jazeera*, could not operate freely and hence there is no independent information about or from Syria. This tighter control has worked in favour of the regime and it attempts to discredit unverified videos posted by various social networks.

Eight, the Libyan example is another impediment. What was supposed to be a humanitarian mission to enforce a no-fly zone soon became a fig leaf for regime change. Hence, UNSC members such as China, Russia and India are extremely reluctant to condemn Syria or to impose mild sanctions. In a way, the Libyan campaign proved to be a blessing in disguise for Assad and his supporters.

Most Syrians would agree that changes are vital and that the region has to reform itself. Corruption has become endemic and some of the close friends and relatives of the President are highly corrupt. Winning two successive elections with over 98 percent endorsement is a signal of regime control but that does not bestow legitimacy. Even informed Syrians know and acknowledge it. But as nationalists, many Syrians are opposed to the idea of external interference and agenda setting. Yes, international chorus against Assad is getting louder and shriller but no one is ready to upset the apple cart. Assad can bank upon the stability card. At least for now.

**P R Kumaraswamy is Honorary Director of MEI@ND**

**A slightly modified version was published by Centre for Land Warfare Studies on 15 September 2011, web-link:**

[http://www.claws.in/index.php?action=master&task=949&u\\_id=166](http://www.claws.in/index.php?action=master&task=949&u_id=166)

**As part of the policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spellings and date format to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND P R Kumaraswamy**