



# COMMENTARY

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## India and the Arab Spring: Challenges and Opportunities

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The onset of the tidal wave of peaceful demonstrations across the Middle East in early 2011 in favour of the end of autocratic, repressive regimes and demanding civil and political rights and new, representative political systems etc, caught everyone by surprise. The demonstrations were driven almost entirely by internal causes and got solid boost from social networking sites on the internet.

Yet, doubts have arisen as to whether the revolutionary fervour is cooling down. In several countries the autocratic rules have dug in and not hesitated to use force against demonstrators. Protestors have also taken to arms in many at several places, as for example in Libya. Western forces have used the fig leaf of a UNSC resolution to militarily intervene in Libya in support of the rebels. Considerable violence has been seen in most countries.

In **Tunisia**, the Islamist party *Ennahad* is expected to form the new government after the recent elections. Tunisian elections have shown that Islamist forces may benefit from the current turmoil in the Arab world.

In **Libya**, Col Gaddafi met his gruesome end. The National Transitional Committee (NTC) is ruling but appears to lack unity. The change of regime came about after NATO resorted to air strikes.

In **Egypt**, the military still rules, the parliamentary and presidential elections are still to be held. Tensions between the Muslims and Christians have flared up.

In **Yemen**, the GCC formula – the President should step down in return for immunity for him and his family - has made little headway as President Saleh is still clinging to power. The violence continues unabated. The danger of escalation of tribal warfare is real.

In **Syria**, the violence level is very high. President Bashar Al- Assad has dug in his heels. He has promised reforms but not done much. Thousands of Syrians have already died. He is under considerable pressure but as yet the army and the establishment is united. The western countries have not yet intervened as in the case of Libya.

In **Jordan** King Abdullah-II has changed the Prime Minister and the Cabinet and has promised to give up some of his powers.

In **Morocco**, King Mohammad VI has announced a series of constitutional reforms and a referendum has also been held to pass the reforms. But the protests are continuing.

In **Bahrain**, The opposition is being accused of attempting a coup. Saudi troops were called in to quell the demonstrations. The Iranian factor is critical in the Gulf.

Arab Spring is very much in the air. Its geo-political impact will be huge. But its progress will be uneven. Considerable violence can be expected in future. There is apprehension that Islamist parties like Muslim Brotherhood, which has taken an ambiguous stand on reforms, may benefit from the current turmoil. Iran also stands to gain from the current turmoil which will weaken the autocratic regimes. Iran, though, will be adversely affected if the Syrian regime falls. Israel is concerned at the future of its key treaties with Egypt and Jordan and the rise of fundamentalist parties. . The historical Shia-Sunni sectarian divide in the region may widen.

## India and the Arab Spring

India, given its historical ties with the Arabian Peninsula, cannot remain immune to the current turmoil in Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf. Peace and stability in the region are important for India.

The key Indian interests in the area are: the presence of 6 million strong Indian Diaspora in the region; security of energy supplies; trade worth \$120 billion; Indian investments in the region. Indian expatriates spend billions of dollars in remittances to their families back home. The morale of Indian Diaspora will plummet if Indian nationals get involved in the violence in the region.

India is also vulnerable to the evolving geopolitical situation in the area. The key elements are: the impact of oil on Indian economy; the increasing violence in the region; terrorism; religious fundamentalism; security of sea lanes of communication; sectarian rivalries in the region, the race between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional dominance; and the impact of the regional turmoil on Israel – Palestinian conflict. Each of these factors will have to be incorporated in future Indian response.

In addition, India's Middle East policy is greatly influenced by domestic factors which include the deep sympathy for the Palestinian cause; religious interaction between India and the Arab world.

## **Indian reaction to the Arab Spring**

India's initial reaction to the Arab Spring was cautious and needs to be analysed in the above background.

The key moments of the Government of India's reaction to the Arab Spring (2011) can be summarised as follows:

- The Indian government reacted cautiously to the peaceful mass uprisings seen at Tahrir Square in Cairo in January 2011. The government gave a halting support to the pro-democracy peaceful demonstrations. PM Manmohan Singh said on February 16, 2011. 'Let me say if the people of Egypt want to move towards the processes of democratization, they have our good wishes. And that's true of all countries. We have a functioning democracy. We do not believe it is our business to advise other countries, we welcome the dawn of democracy everywhere.'
- India abstained on the UNSC's Libya Resolution which authorised NATO to use 'all necessary measures' to enforce a no fly zone in Libya.
- India abstained from voting on the UNSC's Resolution on Syria.
- India evacuated thousands of Indian stranded in Egypt, Libya etc.
- Several senior officials from Arab countries visited India. India engaged fully with them on the evolving situation in the region.
- India fully supported Palestine's bid for UN Membership.

India's seemingly cautious approach can be explained by following factors:

- India was guided primarily by its national interest which consisted of protecting and evacuating the thousands of Indians stranded in conflict zones in Libya etc.
- Domestic factors – the large Muslim population in India, sympathy for the Palestinian cause at home; energy, trade and investment interest in the Gulf and Middle East – had to be taken into account.
- At the non-governmental level, there was palpable sympathy for peaceful demonstrations and democratic aspirations of the people. The media coverage of peaceful protests was extensive and sympathetic. However, the government was more cautious for the reasons outlined above.
- The Indian government, along with Brazil and South Africa, supported the IBSA statement opposing intervention in Libya. The Indian stand was criticised by Western analysts. Western analysts raised doubts about the merit of giving India a permanent seat at the UNSC.

The Indian stance to Arab Spring was governed by India's national interests, which do not necessarily lie with the West. India's response was balanced. The main reasons that guided India's abstentions on Libyan and Syrian resolutions have been explained well by Indian representatives. India was opposed to interference in a situation when there was little clarity about the situation on the ground. The Indian representative noted, 'The international community should give time and space for the Syrian Government to implement the far-reaching reform measures announced by them. We firmly believe that the actions of the international community should facilitate an engagement of the Syrian government and the opposition in a *Syrian-led inclusive political process and not complicate the situation by threats of sanctions, regime change, etc.*'

In the Libyan case, India was concerned that the intervention was hasty. Its representative noted, 'The resolution that the Council has adopted today authorizes far reaching measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter with relatively little credible information on the situation on the ground in Libya. We also do not have clarity about details of enforcement measures, including who and with what assets will participate and how these measures will be exactly carried out. It is, of course, very important that there is full respect for sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Libya.'

These were relevant concerns given the lack of clarity about the evolving situation and also in view of Indian national interests. India may have taken a cautious stance so far but this does not

mean India's approach will be static. As the ground realities change, India will also adjust its position. In particular, India will have to engage with the new forces which are on the rise but whose contours are not clear at the moment. India can also play an important role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts on the region. In fact, Arab Spring may provide India with new opportunities to engage with the region with which it has deep ties.

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