

COMMENTARY

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Turmoil in Syria

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After the 4 February 2012 failure of the US-EU sponsored Security Council resolution on Syria it is obvious that the Bashar al-Assad regime has got a significant breather, at least for the time being. This, however, will not significantly reduce pressure being exerted on it over the almost year- long uprising in the country. The uprising is led by anti-regime entities comprising of both armed and peaceful groups. This started in mid-March last year when different countries in the Arab region were already witnessing large scale mass movements against the established regimes. These movements or the Arab Spring are based centrally on the demand for democracy.

In some of the countries like Tunisia (where it all started) and Egypt, this Arab Spring took revolutionary proportions and people's constant resistance and commitment to peaceful means led to the removal of old regimes. In Libya it took a violent route and after a brief civil war the old regime led by Qaddafi could be removed only after Western interference. The protests in other countries have not been successful despite the fact that in Yemen popular mobilization against the current regime has been the most consistent and durable. In Bahrain, the popular discontent against the regime was suppressed brutally with the explicit Western and Saudi intervention. Seen in this wider context, Syria has completely taken a different course and acquired a different nature.

Syria had been one of the most unstable countries created in the Arab world after the First World War. It was only after 1970 that Syrian political system achieved a semblance of stability under the Ba'ath regime led by Hafiz al-Assad. The regime was dominated by minority Shia sect of

Alawis. A large section of majority Sunnis never accepted this regime despite the consistent efforts of Hafiz al-Assad. Except the unsatisfied section of the Sunnis, mainly belonging to the old ruling classes, rest of the Syrian heterogeneous communities joined the regime and have been enjoying the fruits of power.

The Sunni opposition, later led by the Muslim Brotherhood, constantly waged fights against the regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s leading to its brutal suppression in Hama in 1982. The regime under Hafiz al-Assad was able to control the menace of Muslim Brotherhood thereafter and most of its leadership went into exile. Unlike his father, Bashar who succeeded him in 2000 was more ready to open the political and economic system. Using this opportunity the Syrian opposition gradually regrouped in the country. However, it was not considered a real threat to the regime and therefore was tolerated.

The periodic arrests and releases of opposition leadership was a common thing in Syria till the current phase of large scale mobilization of opposition in the streets of various cities and even in rural areas. It seems the opposition got encouragement from the spirit of Arab Spring. However, one cannot ignore the opportunistic designs of the external forces hostile to the regime in Syria in this uprising as well.

The Syrian Ba'ath regime had been able to establish its legitimacy through a combination of political, social and economic measures. It being a minority-dominated rule created assurances among the minorities which constitute around 20-25 percent of the Syrian population. They, Christians, Shias and Armenians, have been the most important social base for the Ba'ath regime. The Sunni trading communities in the big cities such as Damascus and Aleppo have also been the beneficiaries of the Ba'ath regime and, therefore, have been its passive supporters. The poor farming communities in rural areas whether Sunnis or otherwise had been mobilized by the regime through economic and social policies and through political movements led by the ruling Ba'ath Party. These sections have also remained loyal to the regime throughout the last forty years. The Syrian foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel and Lebanon along with its rhetoric of anti-imperialism have helped the regime to create a sympathetic domestic and regional Arab constituency across ethnic and religious communities.

The current uprisings in Syria have been violent from day one. The official figures released by both the United Nations and Syrian government have put the number of deaths so far above 6,000, including a large number of deaths of security personnel. Syrian National Army and other opposition, armed and peaceful groups, are demanding the removal of Assad from power, end of emergency rule imposed since 1963 and more political freedom. The central demand with which the opposition started mobilizing people was the end of emergency rule.

Despite the promises made by President Assad on more than one occasions, emergency laws are still in force. The armed forces in Syria have refused to do away with the law which provides

them with numerous privileges. It can be said that Assad failed to realize the delicate situation and chose not to abide by his promises of more political reforms. Instead, he resorted to forceful suppression of the opposition. Nevertheless, the opposition too is responsible for the unrest in the country. They have constantly refused to heed the appeals made by the Syrian regime for talks. Their opting for an armed resistance has helped the regime to use brutal violence against them.

The constant engagement of Arab League also differentiates Syria from the rest of the cases of Arab Spring. The Arab League has taken a very proactive role in the affair since the very beginning. Leading to the failures of the Syrian regime to initiate political reforms in November last year, it imposed political and economic sanctions upon it. The Arab League has been the main force behind the initiative of the UN Security Council resolution referred above. With the help of US and European powers, the Arab League wanted to create a situation of armed intervention in favour of the opposition and put more international sanctions. The process of humanitarian intervention, as it was there in the original draft of the 4 February UNSC resolution, failed due to Russian and Chinese vetoes.

It seems that the Arab League, the US and European countries have not learned any lessons from the Libyan case. Their constant moves in the Syrian affair can be termed as biased in favour of the opposition forces and they have refused to address the concerns of the Syrian regime, most important being the probable external role. Constant media attacks on the Syrian regime have created the possibility of explicit armed intervention by great powers.

In order to satisfy the hawks in their own countries these great powers have taken an uncompromising position and have started demanding the removal of Assad as the only solution left. Their refusal to pressure the opposition to come for negotiations has betrayed the real intentions of these great powers in the region and beyond. Suddenly the Arab League, the US and Europe have become the protectors of democracy. This impatient myopic international policy move on behalf of these great powers will not resolve any issue; rather create further problems in the region, especially in Syria. The only way forward is diplomacy and persuasion.

The Syrian regime should be pressurized to initiate adequate political reforms but at the same time the opposition should also be held responsible for its unabated commitment to external vested interests and violence. But as they say, who will bell the cat?

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