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Silence is no longer an Indian option on Syria

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At last India broke its silence on Syria. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in January 2011, India has maintained a studied silence towards the Middle East. Its official response has been minimal, calculative and often non-existent. Till now this not-speaking-too-much position served India's interests, especially when its stakes in the region are high. Despite external pressures and demands from a section of its intelligentsia, New Delhi has consciously refrained from any hasty decisions or unwanted statements. It urged President Hosni Mubarak 'to listen' to the Egyptian people, for example, only after it recognized an overwhelming opposition to his rule.

This has also been the official Indian position vis-à-vis Syria. Until now this was prudent and sensible. India has strong political ties with the secular Ba'ath regime as manifested by high-level state visits between the two countries. Indeed, President Pratibha Patil was in Damascus in November 2010, that is, just weeks before the Arab Spring broke out. India also has established budding energy ties with Syria. But, these alone do not explain the prolonged Indian reluctance to criticize the regime and its handling of popular protests.

Until last March, Syria appeared immune to the popular protests in the Arab world against their rulers. President Bashar Assad claimed credit for pursuing a policy that reflected popular sentiments. Things however changed and the Syrian regime began witnessing discontent and protests. Initially it appeared marginal and confined to rural areas bordering Jordan and Turkey. Calling them disturbances, the regime blamed them on external interference and cross border arms smuggling.

Such a state-centric discourse was also popular in India and was reflected by the views expressed by the Indian delegation that visited Syria last October. A noted journalist gave a clean bill of

health to the Assad regime: “My first impression was that everything is normal in Damascus and life is quite calm unlike what I used to see on some media, particularly the American news network whose reports were proved contrary to reality.” Another vouched that there was “nothing abnormal” in Syria and blamed the Western media for its exaggeration. One academic went on to blame ‘satellite channels’—an indirect reference to al-Jazeera—for the problem. In short, standing up to the US and Israel is good enough for some in India to overlook and justify Assad’s treatment of his own citizens.

India’s first official response had to wait until April 27 and it was made not in New Delhi but during the course of the deliberations of the UN Security Council. As a non-permanent member, India could not maintain its silence. Reiterating the historic importance of Syria, it felt that “prolonged instability or unrest in Syria” would have far reaching ramifications for the Middle East and beyond. Yet, siding with the regime, it drew the attention of the Council to “reports of armed extremist elements mingling with the demonstrators and using the demonstrations to attack security personnel and damage government property.”

In August the Security Council failed to adopt a resolution on Syria because of the veto by China and Russia, and India sided with them. Then, a three member team comprising of India, Brazil and South Africa visited Damascus “to discuss the current situation in Syria and the way forward.” This visit took place when India was holding the presidency of the Security Council. During its visit the delegation met President Bashar al-Assad, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem and other senior officials and reaffirmed its commitments “to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria” and expressed its “grave concern” at the current situation in the country and “condemned violence from all sides.” Welcoming the “establishment of an independent judicial committee to investigate the violence” the delegation stressed the importance of its “credibility and impartiality.”

Later that month, India abstained from voting in the UN Human Rights Council Resolution (UNHRC) on Syria because it did not regard “spotlighting and finger-pointing at a country for human right violations as helpful.” In its view engagement and “collaborative and constructive dialogue and partnership is a more pragmatic and productive way forward.” The NATO military intervention in Libya was also a reason why India was wary of Western moves against Syria. It did not want the UNSC to provide a carte blanche for another military campaign in the Middle East.

Unfortunately for India, Assad was not ready to heed friendly advice from his friends in the region and beyond and the matter only deteriorated. The UNHRC put the number of deaths in Syria since mid-March 2011 at over 5,000. Forced to respond to growing Arab criticism, in early January 2012 New Delhi advised its citizens “to avoid all non-essential” travelling to Syria.

For long even the West was reluctant to dislodge the Assad regime lest it creates more problems for the region. But the ground realities are deteriorating fast. The unrest has spread and reached the outskirts of the capital. Getting out of its legendary slumber the Arab League decided to temporarily suspended the Syrian membership. The peace deal it subsequently mediated with the

Assad regime did not calm down the situation. Amidst continuing violence against civilians, early last month the League pulled out its observers and asked the UN to intervene.

By all accounts it is clear that the Assad regime is on the way out. In the past year the Arab Spring had given four options for unpopular rulers. When Tunisian President Ben-Ali wanted to flee the country in a hurry, Saudi Arabia gave him asylum. Forced to step down, President Hosni Mubarak chose to stay behind and is being tried. Muammer Qaddafi was defiant but was literally lynched by his opponents. President Abdullah Saleh Yemen dragged on until he worked out a pardon package before stepping down. What will be the choice made by President Bashar al-Assad?

An orderly transfer of power is critical for Syria. By not listening to popular discontent and acting in time, President Bashar has squandered the greatest legacy of his father Hafiz: political stability to Syria. Smooth transition is critical not only to maintain the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country but also for the political future of the minority Alawite community to which Bashar and much of the ruling establishment belong. Without stability Syria will plunge into a civil war that would dwarf post-US invasion Iraq.

On February 4 China and Russia once again throttled efforts by the UNSC to adopt a strong stand on Syria. This forced the Arab countries to go the General Assembly which on February 17 overwhelmingly passed a non-binding resolution (137 in favour, 12 against with 17 abstentions) condemning Syria for the ongoing violence. It also called on Damascus "to immediately put an end to all human rights violations and attacks against civilians."

For long India remained on the margin or with the Assad regime. It was not responsible for the failure of the UN to act. That responsibility rested with China and Russia. In recent weeks, Russia has resumed arms supplies to Damascus which has not gone down well in the Middle East. Moscow is trying to work out a deal whereby it still retains influence in a post-Assad Syria. When the Medvedev-Putin duo is indifferent towards domestic Russian opinion, it would be naïve to expect it to be more amenable to international reactions and criticisms.

The growing violence and regional unpopularity of the Assad regime forced India to give up its erstwhile silence on Syria and vote against it both in the Security Council and General Assembly. Even if its vote did not make a difference, it was sensible on the part of New Delhi to have decided to make a difference by speaking for the people of Syria as well as for a stable future for that country. When it comes to Syria, silence is no longer an option for India.

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