

DATELINE MEI

No. 41

Monday, 18 February 2013

MEI Event: Arab Spring or Arab Winter?

Md. Muddassir Quamar
Jawaharlal Nehru University

In association with the India International Centre (IIC), the Middle East Institute (MEI@ND) organized a Round Table on *Arab Spring or Arab Winter?* on Tuesday, 12 February. The talk was led by Prof. Efraim Inbar (Director, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Israel) and Prof. Timothy C. Niblock (Professor Emeritus in University of Exeter, UK). The two speakers took different and opposing stands on the Arab Spring, its causes and implications. Presenting a pessimistic picture, Prof. Inbar argued that the phenomenon could cause more terror emanating from the region. Prof. Niblock, on the other hand, was optimistic and hoped that good would come out the churning going on in the Arab world. In reacting to the speakers, Prof. A. K. Ramakrishnan (JNU) said that the Arab Spring has challenged the idea of democratization from the above and that the failure of the process of modernization has produced disgruntlement among the people.

Prof. Inbar assessed that the phenomenon being termed as Arab Spring is nothing new and that the larger Arab world suffers from failed states which poses a threat to Israel's security. He asserted that the modernization is a failed process in the Arab world. The Arab Spring, in his views, reasserts the fact that there is a common political malaise in the Arab world which the existing system was unable to solve. Monarchies, though, have proved to be better equipped in satisfying the people and this could be because of the prevailing value system of the region. Prof. Efraim also argued that the Turkey has been an exception in the region that has been able to modernize it but the gains made by Turkey is fast depleting. On the other hand he also expressed concern about Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapon that is perceived as a threat by Israel, not just for itself, but for the entire region as well as outside. The Arab Spring has clearly showed that it will lead to rise of political Islam and it may lead to furthering radicalization of people in

the Arab world.

Prof. Tim Niblock, on the contrary, drew a positive sketch of the protest movements in the Arab world, terming that it is not the time to write off the Arab Spring. He said that the initial euphoria among the analysts about the Arab Spring swiftly gave way to grim views because of rise of Islamist forces in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries. He said that both the views had a simplistic understanding of the phenomenon. According to him, the Arab Spring is a complex phenomenon which is indicative of the change which the Arab world is going through. He further argued that the new governments, like in Egypt and Tunisia, are different from previous regimes, particularly the power is acquired by a process involving the plurality of political forces present. He further argued that it may not lead to ushering in of democracy as it is perceived or understood in the West but the new governments can no more avoid popular endorsement. This, in his view, is a positive development.

Prof. Ramakrishnan remarked that the problem is not the failure of modernization as such but the failure of the process of modernization. A process of uneven development perpetuated by the neo-liberal process that has produces disgruntlement. The people, according to him, are voicing their opposition to a situation whereby they are isolated from the process of governance. In his views the Arab Spring indicates that a new public sphere is being created in the region and this may not lead to immediate solutions. But in the long-term the process would lead to more accountable governments which the people are demanding. He also said that the failure of states in the Arab world is due to vicious intervention of the external powers.

Prof. Grijesh Pant (JNU) in his presiding remarks said that painting a grim picture of the Arab Spring may not be right and the turmoil in the Arab world shows that things are changing in the Arab world and that the people particularly, youth want to have a participatory polity and economy. The discussion sparked sharp and engaging debate among the participants that included students, young researchers, diplomats and academics. The event ended with Dipanwita Chakravorty from the MEI@ND proposing the vote of thanks.

Note: Pictures taken during the event can be accessed at:

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.391538930943026.88961.288759447887642&type=1>

Md. Muddassir Quamar is a Doctoral Candidate at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Email: muddassir.2005@gmail.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats 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