

The Middle East Uprising (The Arab Spring): Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The recent uprising in the Middle East astonished the entire world when volcano of human patience erupted in the strategically most important region of the World – the Middle East. It is also known as the Middle East uprising. Taking start from Tunisia, one of the most developed oil producing country of the region, this wave of change took the neighboring countries into its folds. Some dictators bowed before it while others lost lives. Several social, economic and political factors were responsible for this uprising. But media especially the internet was the vehicle to bring the Arab youth closer to each other and spread awareness among them. It is also an irrefutable fact that still the Arabs have to go a long way to get their most basic right – right of self-determination. Even now, there are sheikhdoms, monarchies and worst type of dictatorships that are the main stumbling-blocks in the process of democratization of the Middle East. This paper will take into account all the factors that contributed to bring about this change in the region. It will explore the internal and external dynamics of this uprising and its impacts upon the future political, economic and social scenario of the region and the world. It will highlight the fact that how relevant is the political Islam to these revolutionary movements. The role of Islamist parties in the future setup will be brought to the forth. The impacts of this new trend upon the global politics will also be discussed.

Keywords: Middle East, Arab Spring, Prospects, Challenges, future

Introduction

The Middle East that includes West Asia and all or parts of North Africa has got much prominence in the second decade of the 21st Century where the unipolar world has set up to change the course of history. This historically significant, geo-strategically important and politically vital area has remained in the focus of the world major powers since very long. But after the collapse of Soviet union especially in the wake of horrific incident of 9/11 its strategic worth multiplied many folds. With the absence of the Soviet Union, the American influence spread more. The despotic governments of the region continued to misrule with the US on their back (Naseem, 2011).

Looking back at the history, it is found that since the end of WW II, this region has been ruled by monarchs, sheikhs and other despotic rulers. Enjoying the unflinching support of the major powers, these autocrats established their own empires to carry out their personal agendas. They kept throwing their opponents in jail and misusing public exchequer for personal gains and to preserve their hold on power. Strengthening their powers in their realms, they were negating political, democratic and various civil rights to the citizens. A number of rulers with revolutionary slogans garbed power but did not try to devolve it to the masses. The lot of individual did not change at all. They were reduced to the status of aliens. At the end of the cold War, hopes were raised about the freedom, equality and human rights but the people of the Middle East did not feel any positive change in their destiny. They were still in the clutches of history. The US was following a two-prong strategy in the region; extending unflinching support to the state of Israel and to support the status quo in the region by endorsing the despotic regimes. Democracy was not on the US card. (Muasher, 2012). The horrific incident of 9/11 multiplied their miseries. However, this non-pragmatic policy could not insulate the region from the tides of globalization. Getting impetus from the developments in the rest of the world, the masses that were entrapped in the net of economic and social constraints adopted a new course. Discarding Al-Qaeda's move they went to follow the democratic path. The volcano of public sentiments was near to erupt but it needed a click. The youth under 30 were waiting anxiously when a historic incident took place. A new wave of Social Contracts among the rulers and the ruled was in the offing. The politically oppressed and economically deprived masses were out for their basic rights. The interplay between strategic and constitutional innovation was introducing changes in the constitutional order of the state that proves the constitutional order theory.

In the spring of 2011, a young Tunisian not only set ablaze himself but also sparked the whole region. These flames illuminated the minds of the young generation and shook the old dynasties from top to the bottom. The demonstrations that followed this incident were a clear manifestation of the changed mindset of youth. The forces that brought the Arab youth to the street to throw out the monarchial, dictatorial and unjust political systems are ranging from political to economic and social. To most of the analysts, the higher unemployment

rate is the main factor responsible for this uprising. But it is not the whole truth (The Hindustan Times, 2012). Political injustices, social

unrest, economic pressures and gender discrimination forced them to call for change. Rejecting the despotic regimes, they stood for their "freedom", "development" and "social justice" (The Hindustan Times, 2012). Globalization had familiarized the youth to the world abroad. Looking at the sharp contrasts in their political systems, they started thinking of change. The facebook and twitter brought them together and provided them with opportunity to exchange views and join hands. It can rightly be called the gift of the prevalent trends in globalization and rapid growth in communication technology.

Regardless of exploring the causes of the uprising, this paper will take into account the political implications of this unexpected upheaval, the Arab Spring, on the domestic, regional and international politics. This uprising sent tremors across the region and shook each and every corner of the globe. Change of regimes was not the ultimate goal of the revolt. This struggle was meant for the replacement of an old autocratic system with a new representative and democratic one.

The recent uprising in the Middle East took place in the backdrop of the evolution of oppressive post-colonial regimes, which failed to deliver the promised renaissance after gaining sovereignty and the nationalization of oil and other natural resources (Naseem, 2011). This uprising has thrown out three totalitarian regimes, made two despots to bow before the masses' demand, one is behind the bars now while the other is in exile, and put the third one to death. Although the future of the other despots is also uncertain but of the masses of those countries is certainly bright. Expectations are high and the potentials are remarkable. Democracy is their ultimate goal. Getting inspired by these movements, the Berbers, the North Africans, have risen to get their political and cultural rights (The Washington Post, 2012). Sooner or later, the entire region will have to be democratized. But at what cost that is not yet clear. The problems of governance may be there but the systems will definitely be transformed. The monarchies and sheikhdoms are on the stake while the dictators are trying to get some time. Now the question is how to carry out this agenda for change. A vacuum of leadership has been created at national level while at regional level the polarization has come in. On international level, the major powers are revisiting their policies.

The shift from autocracy to democracy is not a simple one. Of course, it will take some time and will pass through a number phases. The immediate question is of priority as whether the constitution or the election first. The core country – Egypt exercised the latter option first and filled their legislature with the then hardliners – Muslim Brotherhood. This has alarmed the major powers especially the United States. The US administration was on the back of Hosnei Mubarak, the then Egyptian ruler, and was not supportive to this popular uprising but after the popular triumph tried mend fences with the emerging political force – the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. This was the first outcome of this Arab Spring. If this march of democracy is kept going on in the rest of the Arab World, the entire political spectrum will change. Nation building process along national lines will start taking place. There is no denying to the fact that the young leaders of the uprising in the Middle East were neither Islamist nor secular but their struggle paved way for the staunch Islamists – followers of Muslim Brotherhood. The

victory of Islamists confirms that they have an attractive agenda and effective infrastructure to replace the unpopular regimes (Scheuer, 2011). However, it will put an end to militancy as it will provide them with a new outlet to materialize their dreams about the future of their nations. The al-Qaida and other outfits will find it hard to take them in their folds. But infighting among different groups will take place. The Sunni – Shia dispute will resurface in a more risky form. Both the sects will be, overtly or covertly, supported either by Saudi or by Iran to advance their own sectarian and national interests. Thus, a sectarian divide will turn the region into a highly polarized religious politics. In turn, it will give rise to sectarian violence in some parts (Scheuer, 2011). According to Vali Nasser, the renowned scholar, “For the past three decades the Saudi monarchy, which sees itself as the guardian of Sunni Islam, has viewed Iran’s Shiite theocracy as its nemesis. Saudis have relied on the United States, Arab nationalism and Sunni identity to slow Iran’s rise, even to the point of supporting radical Sunni forces” (Nasr, 2011).

On the other hand, the new governments will face growing economic challenges and this pressure will be diverted to the hydrocarbon politics. No doubt, it will definitely affect the flow of these resources to the outside world. Besides new social contracts at the local level, reformed international relationship will come to the forth.

The Spring has greatly affected the regional politics too, On the one hand the Israel, has lost two secular shields on its east and west. Now, it is faced with more isolation at the regional level (Keiswetter, 2012). The Israeli premier, already anxious over the Iranian nuclear program, has now expressed great apprehension over the rise of possible Islamic governments in the Arab states and warned the US legislators to be aware of that menace that may took the shape of Iranian revolution. Expressing deep concern over this development, the Arab Spring, the Israeli PM, in his address to the US legislature, predicted, “An epic battle is now unfolding in the Middle East, between tyranny and freedom. A great convulsion is shaking the earth from the Khyber Pass to the Straits of Gibraltar” (Dawn, 2011).

On the other hand, the Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad looks at the uprising in the Middle East from a different perspective. He takes it as the beginning of a more democratic in Egypt. He also argues that Egypt will not be the end of the story. Commenting on the Arab Spring he said: “To me, this is not a revolt of the hungry. This looks like a case of people revolting because they want to attain political rights. It is something that has happened because there was a feeling of a deficit when it comes to a feeling of affiliation, of citizenship, that your rights are respected” (The Washington Post, 2011).

This shows the great contrast in the leaders of two leaders. One of them is taking it as a blessing in disguise while the other is much concerned over it and fears the emergence of other Islamism states like Iran.

Taking strength from the Arab Spring, the Palestinian zeal for independence will enter into another phase. Thus, another clash of interests is giving rise to another rivalry. Worried about the emergence of new Shia-dominated governments in the wake of

democratic wave, the old monarchies are putting their heads together to contain the flow of Shia version of Islam. The nexus among the Saudi and Gulf States is in the offing to thwart the Iranian influence and to safeguard their autocratic rule from any future revolt is a clear indication of a local Cold War between Saudi and Iran. Nearly 30% of Kuwaitis, 17% Saudis and majority in Iraq belong to the Shia sect (Verma, 2011). As Shia- Sunni antagonism crosses the point of no return these countries could get severely troubled. The Hezbollah and other militant wings will get a new source of life. A new Cold War will suck up the easily won petro money and the memories of Iran – Iraq war of 1980s will be recurred. In short, a new multi-dimensional instability will come into the region which, in turn, will greatly affect the course of international politics.

Looking at the international politics, the greatest outcome of the Arab Spring is the change in US policy towards democracy, human rights and Islamic movements. The US move to engage the formerly banned Islamist movement and the recent victorious group – Muslim Brotherhood is a glaring example. Now the days of those who were serving the US, European and Israeli counterterrorism interests are over. With departure of Mubarak, Saleh and ben-Ali the US lost good friends (Scheuer, 2011). Now the US policy will readjust itself to the new realities where the real representative of the people, who may be the zealous Islamists, would never be able to promote the US interests as it was done by the former rulers. The democratic states of the region will enjoy more independence in their foreign policy making. The US and her Western allies have no other option except to support democracy and work for human rights. Certainly, Israel will become more invulnerable to the external threats. It will have to carry out its relationship with Egypt more cautiously than before. The geostrategic significance of the Egyptian Suez Canal cannot be overlooked as a total of 2.1 million barrels of oil is transferred daily via the Suez Canal and the Sumed oil pipeline in Egypt in 2009. Annually more than 20,000 ships are passed through the Suez Canal (Hurriyat Daily News, 2011). If the Islamists resort to use Suez Canal and Oil as tool of foreign policy, then the world economy and US and European interests will get a serious blow. Therefore, to ensure the uninterrupted flow of trade and oil will remain the greatest US agenda in the region. To achieve these goals, good relations with Egypt must be the corner stone of the US foreign policy. Similarly, the US must work hard to develop the oil reserves of both Iran and Iraq. A continuation of antagonistic policies towards Iran will be detrimental to the US economy. But at the same time the exploration of alternate resources must be on the US card.

In the changing geostrategic and geopolitical environment, it will be very difficult both for Israel and the US to hinder the creation of an independent Palestine for long time. The rise of independent Palestine will not only change the geography but also the future politics of the region. People of the region, who are mostly anti – American, will be empowered to decide their future course. The national interest will definitely be reflected in the foreign policies. Now the strict pro-Israel American approach can never be carried out for long. It will widen the already existing gulf in the Arab-US ties.

On the other hand, the hardliner Brotherhood has started showing leniency and ready to enter into a working relationship with the US and countries of Europe (Keiswetter, 2012). No doubt, the anti-Americanism is there but still the US will have a pivotal role in the Middle East politics and economics. But it will bear fruit if it is based on “mutual interests and mutual respect.” Robert Gates, the former US secretary of defense has rightly remarked, “Any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should have his head examined” (The New York Time, 2011)

Conclusion

The Arab Spring, definitely, benefitted the masses but the issue of governance will dominate the domestic politics of these countries for a long time. The political, economic and religious instability may prevail for a much of the time that may not only polarize the region but also gave rise to a protracted cold war at local level. This war may exhaust much of the resources of the region. The protracted rivalries at regional level must invite foreign interference up to a very large extent. In case of the rise of popular national governments, an Arab block can be formed to check the US and Iranian influence. In case of success of Islamists in the region, the moderate Islamic movements will impetus throughout the world will get great impetus.

The state of Israel may face tough time from the future governments of the region. The creation of Palestine may not be hindered for a long time and it will be a great blow to the Israeli and US interests. The democratically independent governments of the region will follow policies based on the national interests and may cause the policies of major powers to change. Trade through Suez Canal and oil may be used as instruments of foreign policy by the Arab states. The future world politics will be shaped by the energy resources.

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