

The Arab Spring: Supporting Transition to Democracy

A. Gopinathan*

The popular uprising in many countries of West Asia and North Africa in 2011 caught the world by surprise. While there was recognition that change was overdue and perhaps inevitable from the military dictatorship, authoritarianism and single-party rule that had held sway for several decades in the region, the kind of trigger that led to the groundswell was hardly expected. In Egypt, for example, the opposition political parties had been emaciated; the government's propaganda machinery had effectively discredited the Muslim Brotherhood; and the security and intelligence apparatus was reputed to be ruthless. A greengrocer in Tunisia kindled the upsurge, and almost every Arab society caught the fever in no time. While it would be difficult to predict how the short-term political future of the several Arab societies would evolve, it looks like the era of thirty-year-long dictatorships in the region has ended.

Although the term "Arab spring" is used to collectively describe the uprisings in the West Asia and North Africa region, the developments in each country are distinct. For example, Tunisia is often considered as a "local" event except that it did provide the trigger for the uprisings in Egypt and Libya. Egypt, the most populous country in the region, is a case by itself.

The Libyan case became inevitably complicated by the unfortunate decision of the UN Security Council and the subsequent decision of NATO to intervene militarily. There were reports at one time, according to knowledgeable observers, of "informal" suggestions in the UN Security Council that the frozen assets of the Qaddafi regime be used to buy arms for the rebels and for extending financial support to them, ideas hitherto unheard of in the UN. That NATO was not held accountable to the Security Council for its bombings in Libya and for the civilian casualties caused by those actions, ostensibly for reasons of "operational secrecy", has justifiably elicited criticism. The African

***The Author** is a former Ambassador of India to Egypt and was, till recently, India's Permanent Representative to the UN Offices and other International Organizations in Geneva. He has recently been elected to the UN Joint Inspections Unit for 2013–2017.

Union was pressing for a political settlement while the Arab League, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, preferred a military solution; the Western powers, wanting a regime change, opted for the latter.

Yemen was somewhat complicated because of the al Qaeda factor. Behind-the-scenes diplomacy helped in the departure of President Ali Abdullah Saleh without much bloodshed, though the country is still quite some distance away from a transition to genuine democracy. In Bahrain, the Saudi authorities used strong-arm tactics in helping the regime put down the popular upsurge. Any genuine democratic movement that would undercut the Sunni monarchy in this tiny Shi'ia-majority country would have far-reaching implications for the entire region. The Human Rights Council has not been "allowed" to discuss the situation in Bahrain.

The developments in Syria have come as a convenient tool for the Western countries to wage a proxy war against Iran by arming and financing the anti-regime elements. It has been a longstanding perception that Iran has been able to extend material and financial support to Hamas in Gaza and Hizbullah in Lebanon because of the support it has enjoyed from the Assad regime in Syria. The expectation seems to be that if this regime is toppled, Iranian influence in the region will decline, consequently weakening Hamas and Hizbullah and ensuring greater security for Israel.

Perceptibly, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been exercising enormous influence over the Arab League and its policymaking in the past year. As a result, the League has almost become a "Sunna" League, to the exclusion of Shi'ia Islam. In the long term, such a sectarian approach will harm not only Arab unity and solidarity but also stability and peace in the region.

Complicating recent events in the West Asia/North Africa region, in addition to the popular uprising, are regional factors such as Iran's convoluted relationship with several Arab countries, the sectarian divide, Middle East politics, the strategic interests of major powers, radicalism and religious extremism, and the Israeli factor. Post-uprising Egypt, for example, witnessed rivalry between the Muslim Brotherhood and the armed forces, leading to wildfire speculation ranging from their collusion to diehard antagonism. The traditional media have thrived in these societies despite censorship, direct and indirect. The social networking media played a significant role in the transition and can be expected to be even more catalytic in the coming years.

Given that no formal structured opposition was possible in the Arab countries, political activity came to be camouflaged as socio-religious activity centred around the mosque, which strengthened and consolidated Islamic

movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. With this they attained disproportionate legitimacy and evolved as powerful social movements. The regime indoctrinated the middle class for decades to perceive these movements as religious extremists and terrorists. Even after the convincing electoral victory of the Brotherhood, many middle-class Egyptians view it with suspicion, even though many of the Brotherhood activists are Western-educated, highly qualified professionals or successful businessmen. The Brotherhood dazzlingly displayed its mettle in astuteness in the way it removed the top leadership of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF): most Egyptians had by then concluded that the two had struck a grand political bargain. These skills of the Brotherhood will be tested further in the finalization of the draft constitution and in holding the parliamentary elections. Externally too, President Mohamed Morsi has sought to restore Egypt's pre-eminent position in the region by proposing, at the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in Tehran, the formation of a quartet – consisting of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – to discuss and resolve the situation in Syria peacefully.

The systemic structure to be adopted can itself generate some debate, for example, presidential vs. cabinet form of government. Also, owing to decades of autocratic experience, many in the Arab countries claim that their societies are not yet ready for democracy: “too many remote villages” and “low levels of literacy” were arguments that one often heard in Egypt about the difficulty of having genuine democracy before the uprising. That India too has “too many villages”, low levels of literacy and levels of income much lower than Egypt, but still has managed to have free and fair elections, elicited incredulity.

In Egypt's three-phase parliamentary elections the results are declared immediately after counting of the votes is completed in each phase, which can impact the voting in the next phase. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, for example, it was widely rumoured that the Muslim Brotherhood won an unexpectedly large number of seats in the first two phases; this led the ruling party to engage in strong-arm tactics like booth capturing and stuffing of ballot boxes in the third phase, leading to its victory.

A few critical challenges to democratic movements in West Asia and North Africa may be identified here. First, these democratic movements seek to usher in a new value system and culture, not easy even in the best of times. Second, in these days of rapid communication, the ordinary people develop and nurture vast expectations and are eager for quick results, leading to early frustration. Third, the liberals can easily lose out to the religious fundamentalists and/or armed forces in the short term: it is bound to be a long haul; and even-

handed support from the international community is an important ingredient in the efforts of these societies. Selective military adventurism and attempts at regime change may not always succeed.

The international community needs to practise pragmatic tolerance too: it cannot reject the results of elections which throw up victories for groups or political parties not aligned to the West, such as Hamas, Hizbullah or the Muslim Brotherhood, and then launch a process of ostracizing them and imposing sanctions against them.

The military action in Libya has been sought to be justified on the doctrine of “Responsibility to Protect”, a re-warmed version of the doctrine of the “Right of humanitarian intervention” of the late 1990s. It gives rise to several questions: (i) Who is authorized to determine the extent of “clear and imminent danger”? (ii) What is the acceptable/unacceptable “threshold”? (iii) What is the cost of inaction? (iv) How adequate is the response? (v) Has the effort to find other available remedies been exhausted? and (vi) What is the proportionality in relation to the size of the threat to the civilian population? For example, it is now well established that the potential threats to civilian population in Benghazi (expressions such as “800,000 lives would be lost as they are defenceless” and that “we are on the eve of another Rwanda”) were highly exaggerated.

Beginning with Turkey in recent years, many have discussed the existence of a “deep state” within. The phenomenon refers to an entity that is beyond the three branches of the government or its security and law enforcement agencies, and which complicates the existing formal power structure. There is no clear idea who controls it. However, the general sense is that a group of powerful individuals controls most political actions, the economy, the media, and the judiciary. In Egypt, for example, there are individuals who reportedly claim that they are the “movers and shakers” who can “fix” things with the government, the army and the business community, and that they have been brokering agreements behind the scenes between the SCAF and the political leaders, including those of the Muslim Brotherhood.

India and the Arab Spring

Committed to democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, India has every reason to rejoice at the “Arab Spring”. In one sense, advancing political reform and democracy is the unfinished agenda of India’s struggle against colonialism and imperialism which began with its independence in 1947 and for political and economic self-reliance – the vision articulated by

Jawaharlal Nehru. For the people of the Arab world, the spring epitomized the struggle for political and economic emancipation. It enables them to break out of the decades-old intellectual stagnation and to fight for restoration of their dignity as human beings. Decades later, they also perceive that they could avail of the opportunities and choices that the people of Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa obtained in the aftermath of the end of the cold war.

India in its turn has encouraged democratic reform in the West Asia and North Africa region in every way possible. It has sought to do this by leading by example, and not by supporting attempts to force regime change. India has been cooperating with the United Nations and regional organizations concerned and others in supporting democratic reforms.

India principally advocates peaceful transition leading to greater stability and cohesion. The pace of change may be slow, but it ensures durability. Myanmar is an example. For more than two decades, India stayed away from the cacophonous calls for coercive measures: the peaceful transition in that country seems to vindicate India's approach based on dialogue. Several Western countries exerted pressure on India to join them in condemning the military regime there and to impose sanctions. In the International Labour Organization (ILO), a Specialised Agency of the United Nations, discussions were held annually to condemn the regime in Myanmar; although the ostensible purpose was elimination of forced labour, the speeches were invariably political, calling for release of political prisoners, holding of elections, and so on. It redounds to India's credit that it withstood the pressure and, finally, attained the results that it envisaged.

Promoting Democratic Transition

Concern for human rights is enshrined in the UN Charter: but not support for democracy. It was only after the end of the cold war, after more than four decades of its existence that the UN began expressing support for movements towards democratic transition, through its support for New or Restored Democracies in the early 1990s and the subsequent endorsement of the Community of Democracies. The former began in an attempt to help member states emerging from the former Soviet Union or those from Central and Eastern Europe to establish democratic practices. The latter began as a US-Polish initiative in 1999–2000 under the leadership of the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and the Polish Foreign Affairs Minister, the late Bronislaw Geremek, who wished to strengthen democracy not only in Central and Eastern Europe but also in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The Warsaw

Declaration of the Community of Democracies, adopted at the conclusion of the first Ministerial Conference in June 2000, enunciated several principles of sound democratic governance such as civilian control of defence forces and upholding basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.

While concern for human rights can act as a stimulant for democracy, it tarnishes if it is perceived as being used as a tool for strategic opportunism. Those dealing with the Human Rights Council vis-à-vis West Asia/North Africa can testify to this. Several special sessions of the Council have been held on Libya and Syria, whereas Egypt and Bahrain have hardly been discussed, or “allowed” to be discussed. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, one special session of the Council was held on Libya in February 2011. This was soon followed up with the infamous Resolution 1973 of the Security Council, making further special sessions on Libya in the Human Rights Council redundant and unnecessary. In all, four special sessions of the Council have been held between April 2011 and June 2012 to discuss the situation of human rights in Syria.

Civilian control of the armed forces needs to be cast in stone if genuine democracy is to prevail. The support of the international community is imperative for societies such as the ones in West Asia coming out of decades of military dictatorship, single-party rule, and/or authoritarian rule. Attitudes are often so entrenched in some of them that even reasonable intellectuals argue that the armed forces have an indispensable place in the power structure. Examples are often cited of countries such as Turkey, Indonesia and Thailand where the governing institutions used to provide a place for their armed forces, legitimizing such presence in the power structure as an indispensable element of political stability. The idea of constitutional guarantees and justiciability of fundamental freedoms and basic rights is unknown in many of them. The problem is compounded by the historical experience of many of them in having security and intelligence setups which catered to the requirements of the previous regimes.

Over the recent decades, various political groupings and regional organizations have evolved their own principles and methods for promoting democracy. The Commonwealth of Nations, comprising earlier British colonies, adopted the Harare Principles in 1986. The African Union developed the African Peer Review Mechanism in the late 1990s. The Commonwealth has invoked the Harare Principles to suspend countries from its councils for staging military coups. The African Union has taken similar action; so has the Organization of American States. These organizations have, in turn, worked to restore democracy in the errant member states. Potential suspension from political

groupings has often – though not always – deterred against usurping political power through military means. It is up to the Arab League to learn from these experiences.

Emerging Powers and Democracy Promotion

A major element of mistrust with regard to the Western agenda has been the excessive stress placed on the civil and political rights, to the utter neglect of economic, social and cultural rights and the right to development. The emerging powers (Brazil, South Africa, India, Indonesia and Turkey), on the other hand, tend to emphasize both equally. This leads to greater credibility and acceptance in the transitional Arab states. The emerging powers would be ready to share with them their experiences in this regard. It is not surprising that the emerging powers look with deep scepticism at the democracy promotion agenda of the Western powers, given the experience of most of them with the West's brutal colonialism and imperialism for more than two centuries, which led to untold human rights abuses, apart from the worst forms of exploitation of natural resources. But they risk losing their perceived moral leadership and authority if they are not seen to be reflecting the issues and priorities of the South, and seen as pandering to the Western agenda.

In some regions outside of the Western sphere, democracy is perceived as an imposition from the West and, therefore, as a threat to the traditional notion of national identity. Many speculate whether democracy can at all take root within an "Islamic" framework, thereby implying that Islam is antithetical to democracy. They point to the emphasis in Islam of a social order based on community and consensus, such as "shura" and "jirga". Post-Arab spring literature from the West has expressed considerable scepticism on whether or not democracy can yield a durable political system in the transitional states. Doubts have also been expressed whether elections can become a source of legitimacy in these societies; whether universal adult franchise can work, given the status of women in them; and whether continuing political instability, violence and terrorism can act as a hindrance to genuine democracy taking roots.

The demonstration effect of the rising democracies is considerable. They stand testimony to refute the idea often heard in Arab societies that democracy is not suited to non-Western societies or to countries struggling with development.

At the same time, the rising powers harbour the conviction that the existing norms and structures of global governance, international rules and organizations

favour the Western powers. They are demanding a greater say in global governance and their rightful place in a reformed international order. They have seen that the Western powers use democracy promotion far too often as a rhetorical cover for asserting geo-strategic hegemony.

The rising democracies have made it clear that they have a strong preference for constructive engagement, mediation, quiet diplomacy and dialogue as tools of international intervention. They have ratified a number of treaties, declarations, charters and communiqués which commit them to honour these values both domestically and abroad. Most of them favour working through regional institutions or other multilateral mechanisms. The Western democracies, on the other hand, are quick to pursue condemnation, coercion, sanctions and military intervention.

In the middle of 2000, soon after the change in the US Administration, the convening group of the Community of Democracies was asked how a country under a military dictatorship for more than a decade could be admitted as a member of the Community, as the Administration had come to a “determination” that it would be in the Administration’s strategic interest to do so! This served as a perfect example of how not to promote democracy!

Practical Areas of Potential Cooperation

India has been in the forefront of countries supporting democracy in the past decade, having been a regular and leading contributor to the UN Democracy Fund. At the same time, India has refrained from any attempts to force democracy on other societies. India has expressed its willingness to assist other countries in drafting a Constitution; setting up an Election Commission; drawing up laws relating to elections and setting up a multi-party system; framing rules and regulations relating to the conduct of elections and functions and powers of the Election Commission; establishing best practices in the preparation of electoral rolls and issuing of identity cards; drawing up legislation with regard to conduct of elections such as Representation of People’s Act; use of electronic voting machines; acting against electoral fraud and malpractices, floor-crossing, inducement and intimidation; and other related technical matters.

There are other areas of public administration where India can offer to share its experiences with the Arab states in transition: examples could be public interest litigation, legal assistance for the poor, rule of law and administration of justice, transparency in governance through measures such

as the Right to Information Act, establishing constitutional authorities such as the Comptroller and Auditor-General, Central Vigilance Commission, Ombudsman and other oversight and accountability bodies, security sector reform, setting up of institutions to guarantee freedom and independence of the print and electronic media, and the establishment of rights-based national institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission and those devoted to the rights of women, children, minorities and the disabled. An important element of support could be strengthening of bodies of local self-government and empowerment of women. India has shown the way by reserving one-third of seats for women in local bodies. Similarly, encouraging traditional and new media to work in support of democracy is critical; so is an economic model that supports democracy, transparency and accountability.

The protection of the rights of minorities – religious, linguistic or sectarian – is another important area where the rising powers with their multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and pluralistic societies can share their experiences with the Arab states in transition. The challenge is complicated, as the latter are mostly Islamic countries, with Islam as the state religion and the Shari'a the primary source of law and jurisprudence. As part of their efforts to modernize their societies, reduce tensions and build greater social cohesion as democratic societies, these states will have to pay increasing attention to the protection of both denominational and non-denominational minorities. Their current alternative of majoritarianism breeds intolerance towards those who do not conform to the majority outlook.

Another area with considerable potential for collaboration between the rising powers and the Arab states in transition is that of civil society organizations and their relationship with the governments. Civil society activism is a relatively new area in the rising powers, but countries like India have a strong tradition of engaging voluntary social organizations in developmental efforts. They have also become very active in implementation and monitoring of human rights programmes. The experience of the emerging powers in dealing with civil society organizations will be far more relevant to the Arab states in transition than those of the Western countries.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring, a movement that underscores the universal appeal of democracy and human rights, also signifies the importance of people's will in the definition and legitimacy of national sovereignty. Both the established powers and rising democracies are tending to agree that democracy needs to be an

internally driven process and cannot be imposed from outside. This is being discussed in a significantly more positive atmosphere than was possible even five years ago.

Democracy support work does not necessarily involve contentious geopolitical issues of military intervention, sanctions, or other forms of coercive action. Significant room for harmonious cooperation exists in more low-profile activities such as capacity building and other support to government institutions and civil society.

In spite of some temporary setbacks, the long-term prospects of democratic transition in the Arab region remain optimistic, though some disillusionment and frustration in the near and medium term is inevitable. The democratic transition in the Arab states is likely to be a long haul. However, international efforts in this regard are likely to be reinforced by the actions of the emerging powers.

★ ★ ★