

The Arab Spring: The Initiating Event for a New Arab World Order

Written by Hriday Sarma

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HRIDAY SARMA, JUN 30 2011

Today, a new order for the Arab world is gradually taking shape. The ongoing popular revolts in nineteen Middle Eastern and North African countries[i] are in varied phases of the so-called Arab Spring.[ii] Libya is exploding, Syria is bleeding, Bahrain is swelling, and the rest are more or less equally trying to participate in the ongoing, historic, regime-challenging Arab revolutions. The fate of the Arab world[iii]order is fast coming to a head. The feeble political superstructure of the southern Mediterranean Rim (blessed with strong economic substructure) is fast breaking apart due to externally inspired and internally propelled movements for democracy.

For several decades, this heterogeneous region had a political superstructure of 'Arab autocracies' that were broadly similar in one sense, yet also unique from state to state. These Arab states had vibrant free markets that were overwhelmed by the ruling elite and their cronies, aided by corrupt local administrative bodies that exercised excessive internal authority. The political superstructure of the region was further fortified by strict social policing that cracked down on every challenge to state authority regardless of its form; be it human rights activism or religious movements like Salafism, Sufism, the Muslim Brotherhood, and so on. Such seemingly tranquil political structures had been secured from internal and external attack by bestowing lucrative subsidies at home and by signing diverse treaties and pacts abroad. Presently, the state of respective political structures in Tunisia and Egypt has become more fluid with the establishment of interim governments following the removal of their respective autocratic rulers, Ben Ali and Mubarak.

From a modern geo-political perspective, the term 'the Muslim world' (also known as *Ummah*, the collective nation of states)[iv] refers to the 47 Muslim-majority countries where the population is at least 50.1 percent Muslim.[v] Based on this perspective, the Arab world can be considered to be the nucleus of this mini world based on religious faith. The Arab world was a forerunner in socio-cultural, political, and scientific fields during the Islamic Golden Age (mid-8th to mid-13th Century).[vi] The religion of Islam acted as the catalyst for the prosperity and peaceful co-existence of the different communities in the region. However, the Islamic Golden Age was followed by a period of gradually increasing social degradation, political inactivity, economic stagnation, sectarian infighting and religious fanaticism. In the first half of the 20th century, enthusiasm for ousting foreign occupiers swept the masses off their feet; this internally-cultivated nationalism revived the indolent Arabs. The Arabs' newfound boldness against their former colonists is most visible in the actions of Egypt's second president, Gamal Abdel Naseer, who nationalised the Suez Canal in 1956.[vii] [viii] The realization of the high value of the most abundant natural resource in the region, oil, reinvigorated the religious solidarity to stand united against common foes (Britain during WWII, Israel during the Arab-Israel conflict) or for particular causes (the creation of the state of Palestine). With the exception of this example, the attempts by most Arab rulers to usurp power and then cling on to it by hook or by crook have historically been a delegitimizing phenomenon across the Arab world.[ix]

The 2011 Arab Uprisings

The self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor, has instilled enough courage and audacity in the Arab people to defy the draconian codes of state rule and demand the democratic and human rights that they deserve. In Egypt and Tunisia, former victims of state persecution and inattention joined hands to demand freedom, self-

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determination, dignity, and prosperity. The diversity of the protesters—male and female, young and old, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, liberal and orthodox—added to the moral authority of the uprisings. Presently, the energetic voices of protesters are buzzing loud across the Arab world, rattling the remaining autocratic regimes, and reverberating around the globe. Considering the brisk pace at which uprisings are spilling across the Arab world, today all autocratic Arab rulers are struggling to keep their supreme authority intact.

Assabiya (meaning social cohesion, as postulated by 14th Century Muslim philosopher Ibn Khaldun)[x] was demonstrated by the dissident sections of Tunisia and Egypt. The integrated execution of their actions against unpopular dictators has paved the way for the rise of new popular forces that were previously restrained or dormant within society.

A number of powerful tribes, spread across the Arab world, are not presently represented in national government, but are further strengthening their already deep-rooted sway in society. In Yemen, prominent tribal confederations such as Baqeel, Hashid, Abidah, Jadan, and some members of Khawlan are rallying with the opposition leader Sheikh Hassan bin Abdullah al-Ahmar (whose family belongs to Hashid tribe). The decision of the leader of Baqeel tribe, Sheikh Sinan Abu Lohoum, to support the opposition may turn out to be the trump card in the ongoing play.[xi] In Libya three tribes—namely al-Zuwayya from Jikharra oasis, El-Mjabra from Jalu oasis, and al-Awajila from Awajila oasis—are engaged in defending the oil wells under opposition control in Cyrenaica from bombardment by Gaddafi's paid foreign mercenaries. Empowered by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, NATO forces have started operating in Libya under Operation Unified Protector.[xii] This operation includes an arms embargo with a naval blockade, control of the no-fly zone, and command of targeting ground units.[xiii][xiv] This is providing vital help to opposition ground forces to gain back their lost terrain[xv] and occupy previously unoccupied lands.

However, the autocratic rulers are not immediately willing to relinquish power or their firm hold over state machinery. So, one way or another, they are trying to win the confidence of their subjects. In an attempt to quell dissent at its nascent stage, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia introduced 19 new measures worth 135 riyals (\$ 36 billion UD Dollars) that address inflation and housing, increased social security benefits, and eased unemployment and education costs.[xvi] The Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh reaffirmed that he would leave office 'constitutionally' following an election at the end of this year, setting the condition to hand over power "to capable, responsible hands." [xvii] In contrast, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has acted mercilessly against protestors, going to the extent of ordering the Syrian Army to fire at mourners shouting anti-regime slogans at mass funeral ceremonies in the Damascus suburb of Douma.[xviii] Still, in an attempt to heal the pain of his angry people, Assad has lifted the state of emergency laws which have been consistently imposed since 1963,[xix] released many political prisoners and dissidents,[xx] and made considerable increases to the salaries of public sector employees.[xxi]

Interestingly, the 2011 Arab revolutions have seen sophisticated liberal communities—most prominent among which are undoubtedly the tech-savvy young protestors, lawyers, diplomats, and so on—who have played a pivotal role by not only hitting the streets in large numbers, but also by garnering mass mobilization.

Arab World Order in a State of Transition

The current revolutions are gradually forming a new Arab World order, which is in a nascent stage at the moment. The nature and form of this emerging order in the region will depend on the degree to which these revolutions succeed in achieving their objectives. If the majority of dictatorial regimes in the Middle East and North Africa are ousted by virtue of the 2011 Arab Spring, then two important questions need detailed analysis. First, which internal force/forces will hold a majority share in the political superstructure of the Arab World? Second, which country/countries will wield the most influence over the region's national governments?[xxii] Time will tell whether the present uprisings in the Arab world will be a damp squib or a new beginning.

Which internal forces will hold a majority share in the political superstructure of the Arab World?

If we proceed by the 'majority rule',[xxiii] it is to be stated that, even in the Arab world, majority factions (in terms of head count) will eventually triumph over minority factions. This implies the hard-line Shiite groups representing the

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Shia Muslims that form the majority population in countries like Iran, Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen,[xxiv] and Syria[xxv] will entrench their hold over new national and regional governments, if general elections are ever held. The present conservative Government of Iran (the country with the highest Shia majority population) is firmly adhering to its constitutional role of religious guardianship and promoting Shia interests globally. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in a recent meeting with Indian National Security Council Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon, said “Under the current conditions it is very important how the future world order will take shape and care should be taken that those who have imposed the oppressive world order against mankind would not succeed in imposing it in a new frame.”[xxvi]

The intimately allied Iranian and Syrian governments[xxvii] are supporting Hezbollah (a powerful political and military organization in Lebanon made up mainly of Shia Muslims)[xxviii] to further propagate its influence in Lebanon.[xxix] Presently, Hezbollah is in a period of consolidation and is supposedly considering executing daring manoeuvres in the Middle East.[xxx] The plethora of Shiite groups spread across the region like Al Wefaq in Bahrain, and Hamas in Palestine (for example) that enjoy covert backing of the present Iranian government[xxxi] will definitely attempt to control proceedings in the near future.

Another faction that is emerging as an influence in the region is the Muslim Brotherhood.[xxxii] The Muslim Brotherhood was initially established as a religious and charitable organization in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna (with the approval and support of the British establishment)[xxxiii] and has evolved over the years to be “the largest and most influential Sunni revivalist organization in the 20th Century”. [xxxiv] In the late 1930s, it made a foray into the realm of politics to support the Palestinian Arab uprising against the British and the influx of Jewish immigrants. Banna was succeeded by Sayed Qutb as ‘chief ideologist’ of the movement. He postulated the *Jahiliyyah* doctrine[xxxv] that called for all Muslims to wage offensive jihad[xxxvi] against the West.[xxxvii] Several more first-generation revolutionary Islamists subsequently emerged within the movement and created sister organizations in their native countries; for example, Abul Ala Maududi established Jamaat-e Islami in Pakistan, and Mustafa al-Sibai established the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria.[xxxviii] During its first four decades, the organization was actively involved in carrying out terrorist activities that branded the organization as militant; for example, anti-British acts during WWII[xxxix] and assassination attempts on Nasser and Sadat.[xl]

From the late 1970s the Muslim Brotherhood movement underwent broad de-radicalization and increasingly disavowed *jihad* in favour of political moderation. This was initiated under the moderate Islamist leaders Hasan Ismail al-Hudaybi and his successor Umar al-Tilmisani.[xli] However, at the same time, break-away militant groups emerged (like *Al-Jihad*, *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*, and Hamas); *these groups have continued to engage in terrorist activities*. Two major ideological divides exist within the primary movement— *accommodationists* (supporters of democracy and human rights, who are willing to accommodate the West) and *conservationists* (strict adherents to Sharia law).[xlii] While second-generation reformist leaders like Issam Al Arian and Abdel Monem Abou El-Fotouh are pressing hard for democracy and human rights, the likes of Muhammad Badi (presently the highest figure in the Brotherhood's hierarchy) has stated that “the noble Koran is the constitution that sets out the laws of Islam”[xliii] clearly pointing to the strict religious nature of the form of government he envisions. The Muslim Brotherhood has evolved over the years to become the largest contemporary Islamic movement in the world. Egypt's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood registered itself as a political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, after Mubarak's ban on forming political parties was quashed with the March 19 constitutional referendum in Egypt.[xliv] The post-Mubarak era will witness a power-struggle among these two camps. The political, social, and economic fate of not only Egypt, but of the entire region (with large number of Muslim Brotherhood members spread all across the region) will largely depend on which camp emerges as the winner.

Which countries will wield the most influence over the region's national governments?

The present government in Turkey, formed by the Justice and Democratic Party (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is exhibiting Islamic beliefs and values that appeal to the public. Turkey is seemingly making fast economic progress and the majority of its population are reaping the fruits of national progress—unlike what is happening in neighbouring Arab countries. On diplomatic fronts, Turkey has been more assertive of late than it has been in the past few decades, going so far as to oppose NATO's humanitarian military intervention in Libya. Turkish Foreign

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Minister Ahmet *Davutoglu* publicly said, "We are opposed to foreign *intervention* because *Libyans* are against it."^[xlv] Today, Turkey is the one of the most widely accepted role models of democratic Islam among Islamic countries, including Arab countries. Also in contention is Pakistan, the sole nuclear-powered Islamic state that has a parallel military government^[xlvi], has nonetheless been embroiled in internal chaos and which, to date, has strictly adhered to its foreign policy principle of non-confrontation with any Islamic country. Any change in the Arab world order would be enticing enough for Pakistan to seek to reap the fruits of its patience.

Traditionally, the power that has mandated dos and don'ts to other autocrats in the Arab world is Saudi Arabia (with the prominent exception being Libya's maverick dictator Muammar Gaddafi). This economically prosperous country is being ruled by the corrupt and rich al-Saud royal family. The family members (who hold all the top positions in the state) are adept at manipulating events throughout the region according to their vested interests, be it deliberating on the cultural integration of the Arab region or fixing the price of crude oil at the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Hence, even in the future, Saudi Arabia will endeavour to keep tabs on all the Arab countries. However, the big question that is rattling everyone is, 'What if there was a major popular democratic challenge to the ensconced United States ally Saudi King Abdullah?' The United States should exercise the utmost caution in accepting help from the kings of Kuwait, Jordan, and even Saudi Arabia against Muammar Gaddafi, if they are not to be castigated and potentially end up on the wrong side of history.

The Arab world has always been a strategic playground of superpowers in determining their own fate. As such, one should forget about any substantive role to be played by the enthusiastic protestors (be they the Wael Ghonim-led 'April 6 Youth Movement' in Egypt, the 'Democratic Movement of Syria', or others) who are clamoring for a permanent democratic change in the political supra-structure of their respective states. The cautious West and the rising Indo-Chinese powerhouse will not take unnecessary risk in the region, for fear of disrupting their large and lucrative ongoing trade interests.^[xlvii] Hence, none of these powerful countries will whole-heartedly throw their weight behind the emerging democratic elements of the Arab world, which have comparatively less mass support than other religion- or sect-based factions. Additionally, tension and infighting will certainly rupture or distort the current web of situational alliances, be it the Interim Governing Council in Libya, the Civil Coalition for Peaceful Revolution in Yemen, the Green Movement in Iran, and so on.

The Khaldun's theory states that it is the secular laws that bring-up the decline of *assabiya*.^[xlviii] Thus, if we go by Khaldun's theory, the future common good of all the Muslim people in the region will again be subverted by the vested interests of a few dominant actors.

Conclusion

The outbreak of the people's revolution in the Arab world has drastically altered the previously unrestricted authority that was concentrated at the top of the region's pyramidal political superstructure. The 2011 Arab Spring will bring a new political order to the region, regardless of the number of existing autocratic regimes being toppled. Presently, rulers across the region are busy decentralizing state power and giving democratic rights to their subjects. The present transitional phase of the Arab world is crucial, as it will bridge the region's politically stagnant yesteryears with an unknown future political order. Today the internal and external forces mentioned in this article are actively trying to mould the future Arab order according to their cherished ideology and objectives. It remains to be seen which forces will succeed and to what degree.

The new order that is gradually being established in the region will determine the nature of future transactions among the Arab world and with the rest of the world. If the present protests on the Arab streets are sending tremors across the world, then in the near future, an unexpected political event in the region will be potent enough to hit the wider world with the force of a tsunami.

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[ii] American Morning May 2, 2011". Hosts: Chetry, Kieran; Romans, Christine; Velshi, Ali. American Morning. CNN. (04/05/2011)

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[vii] ("The Egyptian people's cause is Egypt's cause. Let the West be aware that our solidarity with this heroic struggle will never fail!"; Nasser: Egypt will fight for her complete independence) European Navigator; http://www.ena.lu/nasser_egypt_fight_total_independence_le_drapeau_rouge_27_july_1956-02-7619, (06/05/2011)

[viii] (Up until the 1960s, virtually all of the oil production of the Middle East was in control of Western companies who received most of the profits, allowing only around 30% of them to go to the nation hosting the oil wells.) Scramble, 'The Oil Weapon', <http://hubpages.com/hub/The-Oil-Weapon> (30/04/2011) [Original Source- "Oil", part 8 Inside Islam (History Channel)]

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[xxi] (President Bashar al-Assad issued a legislative decree adding SYP1,500 to the monthly salaries of the employees, in addition to an increase in the salaries estimated at 30 percent of the salaries which are less than SYP10,000 and 20 percent of the salaries which are estimated at SYP10,000 or more.) 'President al-Assad Issues Decrees on Increasing Salaries and Reducing Taxes Imposed on Them' , March 24, 2011; <http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2011/03/24/338403.htm>, (11/ 05/2011)

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