



An Arab Revolution?

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March 10, 2011

Summary

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We do not know how the Arab Revolution will end. It might end differently and at different times in different countries. Governments and think tanks are doing their best to understand what has happened and what is in store in the womb of time. There is a general impression that the Arab Revolution came like an earthquake without warning. One wonders whether such is really the case. There were indeed unheeded warning signals.

The French Revolution of 1789 ended when Napoleon hijacked it and founded his empire. The impact of the Revolution on the course of world history, however, survived Napoleon's empire. The 1848 Revolutions in Europe, also known as the Springtide of Nations, were put down, but they influenced the subsequent course of the continent's history in a significant manner. The Russian Revolution of February 1917 led to the October Revolution and the dictatorship of Lenin, to be followed by the more pernicious one of Stalin. The 1979 Iranian Revolution dethroned the Shah but led to an amalgam between democracy and theocracy.

Whatever be the way the Arab Revolution eventually ends, the geopolitics has been changed significantly and irrevocably. Yet, the Arab Revolution might or might not prove as seminal as the French or the Russian. We lack the necessary *recul* to make a judgment of that nature.

In many respects the Arab Revolution is a change for the better. Of course, there are darker possibilities. But the Arab Street, derided and underestimated for decades by the Western media and most governments, has put paid to long held certitudes about 'stability'.

The West and much of the rest of the world made the comfortable assumption that the Arabs, without having undergone a Reformation or a Renaissance, were incapable of seeking their inalienable right to liberty and pursuit of happiness. It was part of accepted conventional wisdom that Islam and Democracy are inherently incompatible. The West could and should retain its soaring rhetoric about the gospel of democracy and at the same time do brisk business with the strong men in power.

Chronologically, the Revolution started in Tunisia. Habib Bourguiba ruled as President from 1957 when the country got independence from France till 1987 when his doctors declared him unfit. Zinadin Ben Ali, a minister under Bourguiba, took over and was in power for 26 years when he fled to Saudi Arabia in January 2011. Ben Ali won 89.62 per cent of the votes when he was re-elected as President in October 2009. The election was held in an "atmosphere of repression," as Human Rights Watch put it.

It is significant to note that it was the suicide of a 27 year young street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi that triggered the protest demonstrations. He was harassed and humiliated by municipal officials and policemen who confiscated his cart and fruits. He set fire to himself, was taken to hospital, and President Ben Ali visited him there as the protest gathered momentum. Bouazizi died on January 4, 2011 and within ten days Ben Ali fled as the army surrounded his palace. The army's role should be noted. It was christened as the Jasmine Revolution by a Tunisian journalist and the international media has popularized that appellation. But, serious Tunisian thinkers have objected to it. They call it the *Sidi Bouzid Revolution*, after the town Bouazizi hailed from.

Ben Ali fled leaving his Prime Minister, Mohammed Ghannouchi, 69, in charge. Protests continued and Gannouchi resigned to be succeeded by Beji Caid-Essebi, 84, a former foreign minister. Tunisia was not exactly a one-party state though the RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique, Democratic Constitutional Rally) founded by Ben Ali in 1988 left hardly any political space for other parties which were either banned or prevented from functioning freely.

What caused the Revolution? Briefly, even under Bourguiba, the government had turned pro-elite and started distancing itself progressively from the people at large. Ben Ali moved further in this wrong direction. He got much praise from the West for his foreign policy and economic reforms in favour of the private sector. Nobody wanted to point out to him that essentially it was crony capitalism, not sustainable for too long. Ben Ali came in for a lot of praise from the IMF which in a September 2010 report appreciated Tunisia's 'vast structural reforms' and 'prudent macro-economic management.'

In sum, a combination of crony capitalism, corruption, denial of freedom, harsh economic conditions for a large section of the people, and an aging, unchanging leadership out of touch with the ground realities but fooled by praise coming from abroad, which begat the revolution. But the exit of Ben Ali is only the first step. Tunisia has a long way to go before it settles down as a peaceful, democratic polity that addresses itself to the real concerns of the people.

The revolutionary fever spread to Egypt from Tunisia. Many Egyptians carried Tunisian flags to Tahrir Square. Mohammed Hosni Sayyid Mubarak, president since 1981, had transformed himself rather early in his career into an autocrat though initially he started as a sensible politician, able and willing to listen to others. We do not know what caused the change, but praise from the West for the 'stability' that he guaranteed was a major contributing factor. 'Stability' was only an euphemism for following a certain policy towards Israel.

Mubarak held on despite increasing US pressure, but finally decided to go presumably when the military told him to. The BBC has reported quoting a source that Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi told the President that it was his 'patriotic duty' to leave.

Obviously the US pressure on the military, which is significantly dependent on the Pentagon, played a key role.

The military is in charge and the people are asking for a speedy transition to democracy. The military has moved in that direction up to a point. But, observers are not fully convinced that the military establishment that has supported an autocratic system from which it has benefited enormously will accept a paradigm change.

To predict what will happen in Egypt will be as difficult as answering correctly a riddle from the Egyptian sphinx. We might look at two scenarios, A and B.

- A: Democracy is ushered in within a reasonable time, the military gets the credit for it, and thus is accepted as the guardian of Egypt's polity.
- B: The military retracts from its promises to usher in democracy, the people get impatient and there is more turmoil.

Scenario A has two sub-scenarios: A Muslim Brotherhood dominated government, and a liberal regime led by El Baradei and like-minded people with support from a Brotherhood that accepts moderation.

The Brotherhood with its vast network of hospitals, schools, banks, and dedicated cadre cannot be wished away. There is increasing recognition in the West that Mubarak for his own reasons had gone out of his way to demonize the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has many professionals and educated members and their dedication is remarkable.

Moving to Libya, it has a population of 6.5 million, crude oil production of 1.79 million barrels a day (18th) and oil reserves of 47 billion barrels [9th after Russia (74 billion) but ahead of Nigeria (37.5 billion)]. Some observers in the West have started arguing that Gaddafi might succeed in recapturing the area not under his control or that he might retain Tripoli plus with a civil war raging for a long time.

Other observers have maintained that the question is not whether Gaddafi will go but when and after killing how many. Militarily it is a dynamic situation. It is indeed difficult to see how Gaddafi can remain in power for long after all that has happened. A number of his senior diplomats have resigned making their assessment of the final outcome reasonably clear.

It is abundantly clear that the rebels are fighting hard even though Gaddafi's forces are better armed. In Benghazi, the rebels have formed a National Council that might be converted soon into a provisional government. The Council has a three-member crisis management committee. One member is the former Ambassador to India, who was once Trade Minister.

While it is clear that the rebels have much staying power and undiminished determination, the final outcome will also depend on what the West, the Arab League, especially neighbours such as Egypt, and the African Union might do.

The US has moved its naval forces from the south of Italy towards the Libyan coast. US President Obama and UK Prime Minister Cameron have discussed a “full spectrum of possible responses.” The Gulf States and the Organization of Islamic Conference have called for imposing a no-fly zone. The UK and France are drafting a resolution for establishing such a zone. Signals from Russia are that it might not support military intervention. STRATFOR has reported that the Egyptian military has started giving arms to anti- Gaddafi forces. There is report of a plan to send US arms, paid for by Saudi Arabia, to the anti-Gaddafi forces.

It is difficult to see for how long Russia and China can resist the pressure from the Gulf states and the OIC for military assistance to anti-Gaddafi forces. Gaddafi is caught in a catch-22 situation. He has weapons, money and mercenaries, and some support within Libya; he has to recover lost territory; such military action on his part will cause a carnage; while he might succeed militarily, the very carnage that necessarily accompanies his success will compel the international community to intervene.

President Obama is under increasing domestic pressure to take action. A cyber attack disabling Gaddafi’s ITC (Information Technology and Communication) system is on the cards. The no-fly zone can also be restricted to the area not under Gaddafi’s control. Nobody is seriously thinking of sending NATO ground troops for obvious reasons. Soon there might be a government in Benghazi and that government might draw attention to the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) which was approved by the 2005 summit attended by 150 states in the wake of the Rwanda Genocide (1994).

One possible scenario is that Gaddafi might be able to convert Tripoli (population 2 million) or a part of it into a safe bunker, at least for a while. Some observers who know him believe that he will neither run away nor surrender but might die fighting. Or he might replicate what Hitler did in his bunker.

The next major threat to a regime is in Bahrain, which is close to Saudi Arabia. Bahrain has a Shia majority, but the electoral system has been manipulated to give the Sunnis a majority. The King initially tried to suppress protests and failed. Later, there is an effort to negotiate with the opposition, but it is too soon to say how things will turn out.

Developments in Bahrain are under close watch by Saudi Arabia. The government in Riyadh has banned demonstrations. The eastern part of the kingdom has both oil and a sizable Shia community. Some members of that community are under detention.

Paucity of space does not permit dealing with the protests in other countries including Yemen where President Ali Abdallah Saleh has been in power since 1978, getting re-elected with surprisingly high majorities. He has been a US ally in the 'war on terror' but has accused the US and Israel of instigating the revolt against him. He has since retracted.

Turning to general issues, the role of IT has been slightly exaggerated. Face Book can facilitate a protest movement, but it cannot generate it. In Tunisia, it was the self-immolation of the fruit vendor Bouazizi and not Face Book that caused the exit of Ben Ali.

Let us look at Israel's security. If Gaddafi falls, it might not significantly affect Israel's security. But, the fall of Mubarak does impact on Israel's security for obvious reasons. What are Israel's options? Israel has at least two options. One option is to continue to deny statehood to Palestinians, increase its military strength and deepen its dependence on US protection and support. That option is not the best one.

If Egypt takes the lead in distancing itself from Israel, other Arab states that have followed its lead in the past in adopting a policy of engagement with Israel might join Egypt. In that case, the US will find it increasingly difficult to sustain its current policy of total support for Israel.

Israel has a second option. In the 1978 Camp David Accord there was an annex "A Framework for Peace in the Middle East" and Israel was committed to agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state within five years. What has Israel done to fulfil its commitment? Implementing this Framework for Peace is the second option for Israel. Arabs have accepted the existence of Israel though not all of them might find it comfortable to declare that publicly and unequivocally until there is a Palestinian state. Israel's security will only be enhanced if there is a Palestinian state. The seemingly contentious issues such as the status of Jerusalem, the borders and others can be sorted out if the two sides try hard. In any case, whether it is untidy and unpredictable or not, democracy cannot be wished away from Arab states. Hence, wisdom counsels acceptance of ground realities.

The price of oil has shot up. There is every likelihood of its moving up still higher. Such an increase will slow down global economic growth, and developing oil importing countries such as India will be seriously affected.

It is important to realize that oil is one commodity where the law of demand and supply does not fully apply. That law is only one of the determinants of the price. There are two other factors, the value of the US dollar and, more importantly, the futures market. The futures market is pure speculation as 97 per cent of the oil traded in the futures market are only paper barrels. But, the futures transactions do hike the price up. It is puzzling that no economist so far seems to have worked out by how much the prices will fall if the futures market were banned. It is high time rationality is introduced to the oil market.

India's reaction to the Arab protests was measured and rational. While India believes that democracy is good in itself for all people, she does understand that democracy to be sustainable should have firm roots in the soil. It cannot be transplanted from another soil. The media have reported that the Islamic Brotherhood has sought assistance of the Indian Election Commission. It will be appropriate to render such assistance when asked for.

It is reasonably clear that India will have no particular difficulties in her relations with Arab democracies. It is a false idea that it is easier to deal with strong men rather than with democracies. In fact, there are good prospects that Arab democracies will be even keener to strengthen relations with India. As regards the use of force to stop a dictator from killing his own people, India, keeping in mind its own successful intervention in East Pakistan, cannot but support it provided that the region, the OIC, and others are taking the initiative in asking for it. Use of force is always specific to a situation. Its use in one case cannot necessarily establish a precedent valid in all future situations.