

## The Arabs' Third Awakening

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The popular uprisings in the Arab World bring to a head a number of watershed historical efforts on the part of the Arab peoples for self-determination. They mark the third Arab awakening in the last 14 centuries, reflecting the Arab peoples' desire once more to chart their national destinies and methods of governance, with an emphasis on pro-democratic reformation of their societies. If successful, they are set to restructure not only Arab politics, but also the regional geopolitical landscape, entailing far-reaching implications for the wider world.

The first awakening came with the advent of Islam early in the 7th century, which resulted in the Islamisation of much of the Arab culture and society. It provided the socially divided and feuding Arabs with an impetus that proved instrumental in enabling them to spearhead the building of a multicultural and multi-ethnic empire of faith - springing from the Arabian Peninsula and stretching from Spain to the confines of China - and to build a majestic civilisation over the next five centuries. Their civilisational achievements, involving the participation of many non-Arab Muslim, and Jewish and Christian thinkers and scholars, revolutionised the world of mathematics, and made significant contributions to many other fields of human endeavour, ranging from astronomy to architecture to literature to medicine and historiography. The names of such Muslim figures as Abū 'Alī al-Husayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā or Avicenna, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Abou-t-Tayyib Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Mutanabbi and Abū Zayd 'Abdu r-Rahman bin Muhammad bin Khaldūn Al-Hadram or simply Ibn Khaldon, to mention a few, were ingrained in history as great innovative thinkers and achievers. The Islamic civilisation arguably made a greater contribution to the European Renaissance during the 14th and 15th centuries than what the Arabs themselves had drawn from Hellenistic thought and

accomplishments, as well as from encounters with such civilisational centres as the Syria, Persia and India.

However, the strength of the Arab Islamic empire rested primarily on two pillars: the religious unity and motivation of Arabs under a single ruler with a claim to divine right, and the absence of any major force to challenge it from outside. As the empire expanded and other forces appeared on the world scene, internal divisions and external challenges came to beset the empire, and political malaise, the constraints of overstretch and outside encroachment became the order of the day - dominant factors that have caused the weakening and fall of all other imperial powers before and after it. The first most consequential challenges came from the Crusaders between the 10th and 13th centuries. Although the Arabs eventually met this challenge successfully by repelling the Crusaders and retaking Jerusalem, they could not stave off an onslaught by the Mongolians who sacked Baghdad in 1258.

From then, the Arabs lost control of their destiny. It was to be decided for them largely at first by the Ottomans - Arab converts into Islam from Turkic background - and subsequently by European colonial powers (France and Britain in particular) culminating in the US geopolitical dominance in the Middle East after World War II. A sense of humiliation, guilt and disempowerment settled in the Arab psyche. A number of mostly Arab-driven Islamic challenges - ranging from Wahabi to Mahdi to Pan-Islamic and Muslim Brotherhood movements, with some demanding a return to a puritanical Islam and others advocating reformist Islam - failed to empower the Arabs to restore their past power and prestige, and lay solid foundations for an Ijtihadi or reformist (as against Jihadi or combative) political transformation and social-economic recasting of their societies. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 on what was traditionally regarded as Palestinian land added extra salt to the wound. It resulted in the emergence of a formidable state whose Jewish national identity, democratic system of governance and ideological and strategic ties with the West - the US in particular, in the context of the US-Soviet Cold War rivalry - deepened the Arabs' sense of humiliation and indignation.

At the same time, these developments played a critical role in spawning the second Arab awakening. It came with an 'anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist' Arab nationalist struggle, led prominently by Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser, whose military overthrow of the Egyptian pro-British monarchy and its replacement with a radical Arab nationalist republican regime in 1952, signalled the dawn of a new era for many Arabs. However, the result was mixed. On the one hand, it spurred many Arabs to realise their yearnings for national freedom, dignity and modernisation. Nasser's defiant stand against Israel and the West, together with his successful nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956 and political victory against Britain, France and Israel in the war that followed the nationalisation, not only brought much political kudos to him, but also glorified most Arabs. On the other hand, it polarised the Arab countries between largely non-oil radical nationalist and oil-rich conservative states, plunging the Arab world into a cold war of its own. It did nothing in the way of empowering the Arab peoples to free themselves from the tradition of political authoritarianism in favour of political pluralism and democratic participation in charting their destiny. While the US remained steadfast in support of conservative forces to strengthen its position as a hegemonic power by proxy in the Middle East, rule by secret police, corruption, nepotism, patronage, and inequitable and largely command and limited pro-market socio-economic development became the order of the day in almost all of the Arab countries.

As the radical nationalist forces leaned towards the Soviet model of change and development and engaged in rivalry in pursuit of either national hegemony or leadership of the Arab world, and as conservative states, led by Saudi Arabia, perceived Nasser's approach detrimental to their interests and those of their Western backers, Nasser's efforts proved futile in forging a united Arab front. Accompanying this was the cementing of the US-Israel strategic partnership, and Israel's simultaneous defeat of the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The result was that beyond taking over the Palestinian lands of the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, Israel occupied the Egyptian

Sinai and Syrian Golan Heights. Nasser died in 1970, and so did his policy of radical Arab nationalism and approach to Arab reassertion. Nasser's successors, Anwar al-Sadat and Husni Mubarak, turned to a policy of peace with Israel through friendship with the United States as their *modus operandi* - something for which Nasser had slightly opened the door by accepting in 1969 the so-called Rogers Plan, named after the US Secretary of State at the time, to establish a ceasefire between Egypt and Israel.

The Arab peoples were once again left bewildered with authoritarianism at home and hegemonic pressure from outside - a predicament which seriously fractured the Arab soul. The evolving situation could only widen the gulf between the rulers and the ruled in the Arab world, and make most Arabs cringe at the thought of their powerlessness in determining their destiny. They continued to suffer in silence and felt guilty about having to endure the lack of reform in their societies in a changing world around them. This situation played a critical role in generating conditions that also subsequently gave rise to Muslim extremism, producing such figures as Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network, although the part played by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from late December 1979 and the US-led response must not be overlooked in the process.

The third awakening has come with the current popular revolts, which have already resulted in the overthrow of the dictatorial rule of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Husni Mubarak in Egypt, bloody struggles in Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and in threatening many more authoritarian regimes across the Arab domain.

This time, the Arab peoples' struggle is a call for genuine self-determination and pro-democratic change - a first in the last 800 years. They are driven not by any particular individuals, groups or outside powers, but by increasingly well-informed and socially connected citizens, 60-70% of whom are made up of young people below the age of 30. Their key demands centre upon political pluralism and wider participation, human rights, rule of law, social justice, equitable social and economic development and better economic and employment opportunities, and no to corruption and cronyism, which have plagued

the Arab world for too long. Most of them are devoted to the religion of Islam as their faith, but have not asked for Islam to underpin the operation of their state and society. Those who have spearheaded the uprisings have proffered democracy rather than Islam as an ideology of political and social transformation of their societies. Their call is for indigenous-based structural changes as an Arab, not foreign induced or influenced, enterprise. As such, they have provided a viable alternative to extremist and xenophobic ideals and practices promoted by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates - a development that can only dramatically render irrelevant the appeal of these forces within the Arab/Muslim world.

Of course, there is no absolute certainty that the Arab peoples will succeed. Revolutions have failed, betrayed, and devoured their makers and children in the past. The Iranian revolution of 1978/79 is a good example in this respect. That revolution commenced as a 'rainbow movement' to transform the Shah's pro-Western autocracy into a constitutional monarchy. However, it culminated in the establishment of an anti-US Shi'ite Islamic government under Ayatollah Khomeini, who with his supporters, were able to fill the leadership and power vacuum that the mosaic political-ideological nature of the movement generated.

The situation in the Arab countries where revolts have caused the fall of dictatorial rulers remains very fluid. In the case of Egypt, what has taken place is essentially a military takeover driven not by the military, but by the people. The military has rarely proved to be an agent of democratic change in history. One can expect the Egyptian military to seek to manage the transition in ways which would not seriously disadvantage itself and some of those forces closely associated with Mubarak's regime. There is also the danger of Islamists achieving political dominance, as they have been able to take advantage of the political vacuum generated during the transition period - something that the disorganised secularist streams have not been able to do as well. According to an *Al-Jazeera* public opinion survey, released on 7 July 2011, nearly 50% of those polled indicated first preference for the Muslim Brotherhood, represented by the Freedom and Justice Party.

Another 27% expressed support for the Salafist cluster or what is now called the Nour Party. Although there are some ideological and operational differences between the two parties, both are nonetheless Islamist, advocating political Islam as the framework for Egypt's transformation. The Muslim Brotherhood, with support from some Salafists, now stands a good chance to win an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections in November 2011.

However, at the same time, both the military and Muslim Brotherhood are also aware that the pro-democracy elements are very vigilant of their actions and have remained prepared to resort to widespread public agitation, should either or both of these forces seek to undermine the process of a credible democratic transition. Under pressure, the military has so far taken a number of steps to accommodate popular demands, including setting up a widely based civilian government and constitutional amendments to prepare the way for multi-party parliamentary and presidential elections. It has also put Mubarak on trial, and jailed his sons and several of his ministers on corruption charges. Its behaviour has nonetheless been punctuated by some authoritarian measures, such as the arrest and torture of some pro-democracy activists and failed attempts to ban public protests and industrial strikes. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the oldest and best organised, but not by any means a very homogeneous group, has expressed full support for the people's democratic aspirations and transformation of Egypt into a democracy - perhaps, more or less along the lines of the Turkish model under the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party since 2002.

Given Egypt's position as the pivotal Arab state, the country's developments have had a profound impact on galvanising pro-democracy opposition forces across the Arab world, most intensely in Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, where they are locked in an increasingly bloody struggle for the soul of the nation. In the case of Libya, they finally succeeded, with the support of a UN-backed NATO military intervention under the principle of 'responsibility to protect' in toppling Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's repressive regime, though at very high human and material costs, from which Libya may not recover for a

generation to two. In Syria, it has brought about a brutal crackdown of the opposition by the regime, which has made its position precarious in the long run. With regard to Bahrain, the reformist demands of its majority Shi'ite population against the minority Sunni-dominated monarchy have resulted in a Saudi-led military intervention, posing a serious challenge to the Iranian Islamic regime whose public stand is to champion the cause of Shi'ite Islam vis-à-vis the Saudi's claim of leadership of Sunni Islam.

The Saudi-led action has certainly heightened traditional regional tensions and rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, it is unlikely to culminate in a military confrontation between them. This is for a number of reasons. Chief among them are three:

The first is that the Iranian Islamic regime is in the grip of serious domestic political and economic problems. Its two-tier Islamic system of governance, placing the Iranian polity between the 'sovereignty of God', personified by the non-elected but all powerful position of the supreme political and religious leader, and the 'sovereignty of people', represented by an elected President and National Assembly, has increasingly proved unworkable. It has institutionalised a state-society dichotomy and split the ruling clerics between the traditionalists and reformists, and caused incongruity between the supreme leadership and presidency. This not only resulted in widespread uprisings on the part of the reformists over the disputed results of the June 2009 presidential election - which the regime crushed brutally. It has lately also manifested itself in a power struggle between the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for example, over the latter's dismissal of the Minister for Intelligence and Security and the former's reinstatement of him. Further, Iran's economy is in a very poor state, undermined by mismanagement, international sanctions, an aging oil industry, and lack of foreign investment and high technology. It remains very much dependent on oil income, with inflation and unemployment hovering around 30%.

The second is that the regime is keen to preserve the regional influence that Iran has gained in the last many years as a result of the lack of American policy success in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon

as well as on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Tehran has been able to build some powerful sub-national allies within these countries, which, together with the Iranian-Syrian strategic partnership, has enabled it to preside over an emergent but predominantly Shi'ite strategic entity stretching from Kabul to Beirut.

The third is that the Iranian regime has its hands full in relation to the persistent pro-democracy unrest in Syria - the regime's only reliable Arab friend in the region and critical to its organic relationship with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Tehran finds it in its interest to help the minority Alawite-dominated government of Bashar al-Asad's in whatever way possible to crush the majority Sunni-dominated protests in the same way as it has dealt with its own opposition.

However, this does not suggest that Iran and Saudi Arabia are unlikely to engage in a conflict by proxy. This is very much on the cards, and may have already commenced. The two sides have the necessary capacity to increase their support for client forces against one another, for example, in Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan. In relation to Bahrain, where the government has pursued, with Saudi help, a bloody crackdown of the opposition, Iranian and Hezbollah agents may have already become active in support of the Shi'ite opposition.

While the causes of the third wave of the Arab awakening are discernable, no-one at this stage can be sure of its outcomes or future direction. The only thing that can be said with clarity is that the Arab peoples have made a serious pro-democracy start in pursuit of self-determination, but this is the beginning of a long, arduous, and painful journey. None of the Arab states currently has the necessary institutional and infrastructural foundations - ranging from separation of powers, rule of law, and an independent judiciary to a vibrant civil society - to put them on a smooth path to democratic transformation.

The success of this Arab awakening will depend on how the transition is managed and how outside powers, especially the US, will balance their geopolitical interests with the Arab peoples' democratic aspirations. The Obama administration's approach has so far been anomalous. As a result, whilst empathising with Egyptian, Tunisian, Yemeni, Syrian and Libyan protesters - in the case of the latter also

playing a key role in support of a UN-backed NATO intervention under the principle of 'responsibility to protect' - it has been circumscribed in its treatment of some of the others. For example, it has remained, at best, muted in relation to the bloody suppression of the opposition in Bahrain, or lack of democracy in Saudi Arabia and some of its Gulf Cooperation Council partners, especially the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, it has refrained from applying the principle of 'responsibility to protect' to safeguard the rights of the Palestinian people, especially in the Gaza Strip, under Israel's occupation and punitive measures. If anything, the Obama leadership has lately retreated from its earlier stated aim to push for the creation of an independent Palestinian state along the 1967 borders. It has opposed the Palestinian Authority's request from the UN for independent statehood in favour of direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, although such negotiations have led nowhere in the past 20 years largely because of Israel's refusal to acknowledge for Palestinians what it cherishes for itself: freedom, independence and security.

Once the dust of the present uprisings settles in the Arab world, the US and its allies may seriously regret this anomaly in their relations with the Arab/Muslim world. If the pro-democracy forces succeed in their objectives, it will not only unite the Arabs, but also diminish Israel's claim of higher moral ground as the only democracy in the region. It may well also result in the rationalisation of many Arab countries' relations with the US. In the case of Egypt, a recent credible public opinion released by Pew Global Research on 25 April 2011, has already revealed that some 54% of Egyptians want the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty of 1979 to be scraped and Egypt's relations with the US downgraded. This, together with the process of normalisation of relations which is underway between Egypt and Iran after 30 years of rupture must be of utmost concern to the US and Israel.

Whatever the ultimate outcome, the Arab political landscape is set to change, as unpredictable as the direction of this change may be. The Arab events have already debunked a number of long-held assumptions by scholars and observers:

The first is that Shi'ite Muslims have traditionally been more rebellious than Sunni Muslims towards public authority. The Sunni-

dominated Arab uprisings have proved that when it comes to the issues of liberty, political decency and human dignity, the Sunni-Shi'a divide is irrelevant.

The second is that an outside power backing of a ruler can provide immunity for that ruler against a disconnected public. It is the gulf between the ruler and the ruled that lies at the heart of the Arab revolts.

The third is that democracy can be imposed from outside under the right conditions. To the contrary, it is a journey that needs to spring from within a state. The cases of Iraq and Afghanistan have clearly demonstrated that democracy cannot be imported.

The fourth is that the Arab peoples have historically proved to be incapable of rising above an authoritarian political culture because this is what is enshrined in Islam. The Arab pro-democracy revolts have now laid this to rest. This is not to claim that Islam will not have a central role in the life of a majority of Arabs. What it does stress is that political Islamists will be a cluster among many actors who would need to compete for power and play a part in shaping the pluralist orders which are in the making in a number of Arab states.

As the Arab revolts take their course, given the Middle East's oil-based economic and strategic significance, their consequences for the rest of the region and the world cannot be under-estimated. They carry the potential to give the Arab peoples an unprecedented role in managing their destiny and determining their foreign policy priorities in the medium to long run. At the very least, the Arab peoples have turned the wheels against authoritarianism in pursuit of democratic reforms. Those rulers and outside powers that may ignore this would do so at their own peril. The alternative is authoritarianism and Jihadism, on which most Arabs have turned their back.

### Session Three Syria and Lebanon