

General

The Centre for land Warfare Studies organised a round-table discussion on 'Arab Spring- Emerging Challenges and Lessons' on 22 July 2011 to discuss the recent happenings in the Arab World and their impact on India and in the region. The Seminar was chaired by Ambassador Chinmaya Gharekhan, former Permanent Representative of India at the UN & Special Envoy to the PM for West Asia. Ambassador KC Singh, former Secretary, MEA, Prof PR Kumaraswamy, Centre for West Asian Studies, JNU and Col RSN Singh, Editor, Indian Defence Review, were the panelists. Capt (IN) Alok Bansal , Senior Fellow, CLAWS, was the discussant. The discussion was attended by serving and retired officers of all three Services, and members of the strategic community.

Opening Remarks: Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd), Director, CLAWS

Since early spring, West Asia has been in turmoil of a different type. This seminar proposes to see how the situation is unfolding, the likely end results and the possible impact on India. There was a fairly bloodless revolution in Tunisia, and Egypt, both resulting in the dictators being overthrown. But Libya has been holding out for almost three months now, despite sanctions and aerial attacks. This brings forth the argument on the efficacy of sanctions and of air power in winning wars alone, without having the 'boots on ground'. We also need to analyse our capability to undertake evacuations of Indian Diaspora from such troubled spots across the world ?

Amb Chinmaya Gharekhan

This is an issue that should be of great interest to India. India was initially slow to react to the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, but has since placed itself well. We need to discuss our assessments of the current situation in the Arab region and how the future may turn out, based on analysis of the factors, while accepting that each country may have its unique set of problems. We also need to consider our capabilities considering the enormity of the task of Diaspora evacuation, which might of much larger proportions, should the disturbance spread to the Gulf region.

Amb KC Singh

The consequences of the Arab Spring have not been uniform for all the affected countries of the region due to four factors. The first of these is the role of the military. In Egypt and Tunisia, the Army played a stabilising transitional role. In both these countries, the army remained neutral, allowed the demonstrations to take place, refused to follow instructions to use strong arm tactics, and at the same time prevented rioting taking place. While the Tunisian king bolted, Mubarak went reluctantly. That Mubarak was deposed despite being a close US ally has alarmed the Saudis, who now feel that

even they could be betrayed by the US. The way Mubarak has been treated in Egypt after he stepped aside does not augur well for other such movements as it sends across a message that if one agrees to an orderly exit, then he and the family would be punished. This has resulted in the other Arab dictators, like in Libya, behaving differently.

Some rulers read the writing on the wall and took quick measures to accommodate the aspirations of the people. In Morocco, the King quickly ceded a lot of power to the PM and thereby contained the situation. The Jordanian King tried to cede power gradually, but without much success due to his country's demographics. A military dictator does not have the same legitimacy as a monarch as the latter has historical lineages and provides a certain aura to his people.

The third factor played out where regional or global concerns allowed a dictator much greater leeway as in the case of Bahrain and Yemen. The Yemeni President undergoing treatment in Saudi Arabia may well return to Yemen as the Saudis are backing him and the Americans may not be unhappy with this arrangement as Yemen is now the next breeding ground of radical Islam. Even if Al Qaeda is ejected, there are other fire breathing radicals in Yemen who can cause problems for Saudi Arabia, making it a very serious existential problem for them. Most of Saudi Arabia's traditional habitation is along the Red Sea coast towards Yemen. Yemen is also along the traditional trade route. The Saudis fear the developments in Yemen and their influence through religious osmosis on their tribes.

The fourth situation played out where the rulers became defiant like Assad in Syria and Colonel Gaddafi in Libya. In Syria, the minority Alawite, basically Shia origin government is riding roughshod over the nearly 60 percent Sunni population. They have their alliance with Iran on one side and their influence extending up to Lebanon on the other side. It's a very critical country for happenings in that region. Fearing a Sunni radicalized version succeeding Assad, the US initially kept away. But the rising violence by Assad is now internationally intolerable.

One of the reasons for these dictators' failure in quelling these rebellions is because their intelligence agencies are not equipped to handle the information explosion. The internet, mobile phones and other means of communication have allowed people to interact and share their views, even under a clamp down, resulting in people hitting back. These methods ensure international exposure, arousing international opinion.

Initially, the Arab Spring was undercutting the Al Qaeda. The original motivation for bin Laden was that all foreign troops must leave the holy land. He had fallen out with the Saudi royal family when they had invited US to intervene in Kuwait while spurning his offer of battle hardened warriors. The corollary to this being that all those who kept

these troops there were 'stooges' of the US and the only way to eject them was to fight them with the barrel of the gun, with terrorism and with radical Islam. The overthrowing of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, a principal US ally, through mostly peaceful demonstrations undermined the role of Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda's no. 2 is an Egyptian; his background being of Muslim brotherhood, which not only peacefully took part in the demonstrations, but also participated in the elections. It's an interesting lesson, but we need to follow the happenings, especially in Egypt because of its dominant role in the region.

The best possible outcome for Egypt and other countries would be to emulate the example of Turkey, wherein a right of centre government has assumed power with more or less neutral military which only defines the broad lines of governance. Over a period of time as democracy matures, the military could withdraw from the political scene. The worst outcome is an extreme right group coming to power and in collusion with the military cracking down. Or an extreme right group initially coming to power backed by the military and which then penetrates the military to strengthen itself.

One crucial factor in the outcome will be the way the 'right of centre' forces are handled. Opposition would come from the mosque in these countries as all secular civilian opposition has been eliminated. Muslim Brotherhood is the only organized opposition party in Egypt and similar is the case in other countries.

The role of Iran also needs to be noted. Iran is predominantly Shia as is most of the Arab world. Iran's concerns over Bahrain, which is a Shia majority area being ruled by the minority Sunni ruling family has created tension in the region. Iran also has historical differences with Egypt and both countries do not maintain diplomatic relations with each other. Iran is different from the Arab and Gulf states as it does have limited democracy and the power is not confined to families. The dispersed power gives it a feel of controlled democracy, thus preventing situations similar to the Arab world from arising.

Air power may work in Libya because it is being used to degrade Gaddafi's war fighting effort without direct involvement in the conflict. This is enabling the rivals to slowly build up pressure on Gaddafi. This would slowly lead to a positive outcome. We need to establish links with the rivals.

We must rethink our non aligned position. We need to be selectively aligned to ideas and concepts as otherwise it would make us fence sitters. This is an ongoing debate.

Prof PR Kumaraswamy

The so called 'Arab Spring' witnessed an enormous euphoria in the beginning with a lot of expectations of a sweeping wind of change. However, approximately six months later, nothing major has changed actually in these countries. Only two rulers have left

the field but the people associated with them are still running the show albeit from behind the curtain. Building a democracy takes centuries and alternatives to a well entrenched system don't come overnight. Hence, the initial euphoria is slowly running out of steam and the initial euphoria is gradually giving way to pessimism.

The rulers and dictators of these countries always played down demand for their stepping down with an argument that their sticking to power ensures stability in the region. They argued that their relinquishing the power would lead to turmoil. Unfortunately, today, the same argument is being selectively accepted by international community which initially supported the movement for restoration of democracy in the region.

After almost six months of the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, no Arab leader has been able to provide an alternative to him. No leader has been able to provide a medium which is acceptable to everyone. No political party or leader has been able to provide a model which others can follow. This leadership void has forced the so called Arab Spring to head nowhere.

It is pertinent to note that, traditionally military has always been in dominance in these countries. The military supports the rulers since its survival depends on the rulers, not the protestors. Historically, the moment the Army has distanced itself from rebels/protestors; the equation has changed in the favour of the government. The situation is the same today. Even after the rulers have been ousted, the military continues to enjoy dominance. In view of aforesaid, the military is likely to emerge stronger since they may now have legislative power as well. It will not be actual restoration of democracy. In fact, it is quite likely that instead of following the Turkish model, it may land up adopting a Pakistani model which would be catastrophic for the whole world.

We must not forget that approximately six millions Indians are working in Gulf region which generates around 100 million of foreign exchange for us. The Gulf region accounts for 60 percent of our energy resources import. India must look after the interests of Indians in the region. Indian officials have aptly not been the first to make statements, once the protests started in the region six months ago. We have deliberately never been the leader in condemning or supporting any side.

Gulf region at present is burning and the situation is likely to remain volatile in the near future. Therefore, the best option for Indian Government is to keep silent. We must monitor the developments in the region primarily to look after our interests. There is no clear cut solution as to whether Indian Government should speak or not but it is recommended that we must speak only to make impact. This can be done only if our government makes a statement only when the situation is clear after closely monitoring

the developments in the region. Till then silence is the best policy.

Discussion

India's response to global conflict situations should be measured and also based on the platform where these need to be expressed.

In India, a similar problem may not surface as it's a working democracy and such agitations would be difficult to sustain.

If agitators resort to violence, they would provide the Army with a valid reason to intervene.

The role of the Army would also depend on its composition and its importance in the national political scene.

RSN Singh

The causes for Arab Revolution for different countries could be characterized into two categories. In Tunisia, Bahrain and Libya, the causes are more social than political or economic and in Egypt, Yemen and Syria, it is mainly due to political, economic and sectarian concerns. There was a danger of the revolution engulfing Saudi Arabia, which will have repercussions especially in terms of religious upheaval and the energy security of the world. As Saudi Arabia is the custodian of Mecca and Medina, the ripples of any upheaval there will be felt in the entire Muslim world.

With regards to the developments in West Asia, there are two major geopolitical processes at work, i.e. increasing Shia-Sunni rivalry and blatant western intervention in the region for energy security. In fact, oil is the main reason for the western armed intervention in Libya and is thinly disguised as a move to rid the country of 'despotic and unpopular' Gaddafi. It is clear that the West will not allow its leverages in the Arab World to weaken.

The Arab spring has also given rise to sectarian conflict being abetted by Saudi Arabia in case of Bahrain and Iran in the case of Syria. Considering the fact that several countries have significant Shia populations like Kuwait – 30%, Saudi Arabia – 17%, and Iraq (Shia majority), it is quite possible that Shia-Sunni rivalry becomes increasingly violent and irreconcilable.

The Arab spring has also given rise to organizations or parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, which were established with the objective of creating one single Islamic Umma. Though the Muslim Brotherhood is now participating in the political process, it remains to be seen that it will act as a secular and accommodative organization and most importantly shed its pan-Islamic designs. If the Muslim Brotherhood were to persist

with the same ideology, in case it came to power, it could become the rallying point for Islamists in the entire region.

It is also not clear as to what shape the future dispensations in the Arab World will acquire. The military in all these countries continue to exercise the decisive role. The posturing of the military has and will decide the political future of the affected Arab countries. However, the majority will someday assert itself and will keep challenging the status-quo.

In the backdrop of the upheaval in the Muslim world especially post 9/11, multiculturalism has taken a back seat in many European countries and even the US. The anti-US feeling may even become more acute in the Arab World if the West continues to militarily intervene in the region.

Instability in the Arab World will continue and at present the chances of democracy is slight. On the contrary, it will give big impetus to radicalism in the Arab World. The biggest impact will be on the energy security, as oil prices are bound to soar.

Amb Chinmaya Gharekhan

There will be some broad trends in the region:

- Whatever the dispensation that occurs, people of all these countries will be more empowered, have more participation in running of the country. In Egypt, the debate is whether to have elections first or formalise the constitution first. Protests have ensured that the role of the Egyptian Army would not be institutionalised, unlike Pakistan.
- The emerging Arab governments would not be pro Israel or US and would thus more actively support the Palestinian issue.
- Islamic factor will come to the fore. While the Islamists have not been behind these agitations, as they are the only organised force besides the Army in these countries, they would garner the maximum benefits. For example, even with their limited support in Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood may emerge as the largest cohesive force in the Egyptian Parliament after the elections.
- Iran will be a negative factor in the region. They would use their clout in these countries as bargaining chips in their dealings with the US.
- West has given up its resolve to remove Col. Gaddafi from Libya, so long as he steps down. The complicating factor now is that if the International Criminal Court declares Gaddafi an offender, he would not be left with options for a wilful step-down. While the rage of the suppressed people is understood, as a consequence of the treatment meted out to Mubarak, the other dictators have been discouraged from letting go of the power.

Irrespective of who is in power, our national interests should take priority. The safety of the Indian Diaspora is of prime importance, especially in the Gulf. History has proven that dictatorial monarchies have not been inimical to India's interests as there has been clarity in the authority that needs to be engaged.

The Gulf States are not as stable as they were before these agitations started. It is anybody's guess as to how long would the monarchs there be able to buy their people's silence. We should now prepare our grounds for the future and be ready to establish links with the organised rebel groups in these states.

Discussant: Capt (IN) Alok Bansal, Senior Fellow, CLAWS

Democratisation always prevents radicalisation. In a predominantly Islamic society, if the population does not have right of democratic dissent, the opposition to the regime invariably manifests itself from the ramparts of the mosque.

The initial protests did not have a sectarian or a tribal orientation. They were spontaneous reactions of educated/ semi-educated urban youth. Subsequently, the western intervention or the regime manipulations have given them a sectarian/tribal orientation.

As of now, King of Morocco has not ceded any real powers. He has unleashed a quasi democratisation which may start a tide which however may be difficult for him to control.

In Libya, the rebels have the edge. The Southern offensive would threaten the area of Gaddafi's supporters and the ensuing attrition may seriously pressurize him.

The significant difference between Syria and Libya is that in Libya many military commanders rebelled. Whether Gaddafi retains Tripoli or not, a larger part of Libya would go to the rebels.

Govt of India should wait and watch as to which side the tide is turning before commenting or committing itself. It is too early to say anything till Egypt stabilises for this would give the lead for shape of things to come not only in the Arab world but also the Gulf.

As soon as democratisation takes place, it would be very difficult for the western countries and their 'stooges' to keep a pro-Israeli stance.

Discussion

- Turkey holds a lot of influence in the area and would have a role to play.

- The underpinnings of nationhood of most of these Arab countries were based on carvings by rulers, while coming out of colonisation. The area does not confirm to the modern nation concept. Most of these countries in the Arab world and in the Gulf are not even proper states but only tribal conglomerates. While in most Muslim majority countries, the military is directly in power or the power behind the throne, one cannot generalise that Islam is inimical to democracy.
- One of the arguments is that rather than spend so much militarily to control the region, if oil consumption is reduced, it will bring down the price of oil and make it difficult for this region and its rulers to sustain.
- Yemen is an important breeding ground and most of the attempted attacks on US since 9/11 have emanated from here. It also has a very hospitable terrain for terrorists to thrive.
- Saudi Arabia would be the most endangered from the terrorism which it exported initially.
- Till now these dictators had provided stability in an otherwise volatile region. We must ascertain our response now to the chaos that may ensue, so that our interests are not adversely affected.