Dealing with Arab Protests: A Hobson’s Choice?

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The wave of success in Tunisia & Egypt is on a halt in Libya. The rebels are unsuccessful to reach Tripoli yet, which is still the seat of Colonel Gaddafi & the pro-Gaddafi forces are launching offensive against the rivals’ strongholds in the east of the country. Recent declaration of ‘No Fly Zone’ and the latest air strikes aimed at weakening and toppling of the regime, are yet to reach the culminating point of making the picture clearer. If Gaddafi manages to survive then that will be a blow to ‘freedom aspiring’ people not only in Libya but in the entire Arab world. But are there some general lessons to be learnt from the evolving Arabian saga? The Arab protests are the outbursts of decades of oppression & deprivation of the people by the rulers. The lion’s share of the income from oil never reached the people while the ruling elites profited. Under these rulers, the economic condition of the people reached a sorry state. In Libya, which is currently the centre of attention, 30% of the people are jobless while 33% live below poverty line, in Yemen its 35% & 45% respectively while in Jordan, the figures are 13% & 14% respectively (source: bbc.co.uk) & the picture in rest of the Arab world is no less dismal. And when this is the outcome of failed government policies, the autocratic political set ups debar people from expressing their grievances through an open political system.

Human history bears witness to the fact that wherever the anger cannot get canalized through the front door; it is channeled out through backdoor, in militant mode. In the Arab world the public grievance gradually took the shape of religious extremism & militancy. And as this ‘violence against the State’ grew, tougher became the regimes. The rulers here are working hard to crush this ‘treason’, and while doing so, they brand any anti-government element as a terrorist. But it is true that religious extremism and militancy have combined to take a concrete shape in the Arabian socio-cultural sphere. The corrupt regimes, the popular perception of the leaders being Western lackeys, the stationing of foreign troops in the ‘sacred’ Arab land and most importantly, the pro-Israel policies of Washington and its allies, all have generated strong resentment among the people & helped in shaping and sustaining the ‘Jihadi’ mentality among considerable sections of the population. Today, in this transition phase, the extremists would certainly look for their position in any future political set up. Many suspect that Al-Qaeda might exploit the turbulence in the Arab world to its advantage. And this is a concern for not only the rulers but also their Western patronizers. The big powers cannot let that happen. Slipping of this part of the world in the hands of Islamists is the last thing they want. Not only the U.S. and her allies, other major payers like China or Russia would not want such a destiny for the Arab world. The contagion can go beyond and reach the shores of
Caspian Sea anytime where similar socio-political and economic systems are in vogue. The compass in this connection points to regions like Xinjiang & Grozny. Moreover, the instability in these oil-producing countries will certainly have economic repercussions, most unwelcome for energy hungry countries around the world. So democracy is not an easy alternative for the powers, both inside and outside the Arab world, to satisfy the agitators. Europe & the USA face a difficult choice today where the objectives of the protest go with their values, but the possible outcomes frighten them.

Democracy or free society model, if imposed from above, might further complicate the situation. This part of the world has not experienced substantial freedom (political or social) in its modern history, nor has the concept of nation-state based on secular credentials taken firm localized roots. So any future democratic arrangement will have to blend into this social set up which may empower the fundamentalist elements. The best example can be Pakistan, which is succumbing to fundamentalism in spite of greater experience of social freedom. The Arabian situation today is full of complexities. Political freedom is out of question for most of the surviving power hungry ruling elite groups and largely undesirable for the powers outside. Another way forward could have been to adopt gradualism and reform the nature of regime control. But as most analysts point out that it’s too late for that. The rulers in this part of the world have traditionally drawn legitimacy for their rule either from their control over the army or from the clerics. People have not been a matter of great concern for them. But now they plan to quench the thirst of the people by granting partial freedom like elected governing bodies. But the military & the clerics, the most influential elements in the Arab world, will certainly struggle to preserve their power to influence even in a ‘quasi-democratic’ set up. What will be the outcome of such conflicts remain uncertain, but to mollify the agitators, economic reform should be the immediate tool of action. The regimes should formulate employment generating policies to ensure that at least some amount of resources reach the people.

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