



## The Discontent in West Asia Implications for India

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The food riots that originated in Tunisia have now swept across the entire Arab world, though the epicenter of this popular uprisings were located in non-Gulf Arab countries including Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Syria and Yemen. So far, they have toppled the Ben Ali government in Tunisia and forced President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to resign, and in Yemen, the GCC is engaged in negotiating the deal for the exit of President, Mr. Saleh. The King of Jordan and Mohammad Abass of Palestine have fired their respective cabinet as a preventive measure. In Syria, the Assad government has unleashed the reign of terror on the protestors. Libya is now fully engulfed in civil war. Qatar witnessed a powerful anti-government protest that was only brought to control with Saudi military intervention. Iran witnessed one of the largest demonstration against the incumbent regime but quickly subsided.

These events are not isolated incidents rather are connected with regional and global developments taking place over the last two decades. 'Food riots', 'bread riots' or 'urban riots' have surfaced with unfailing regularity in Egypt (January 1977, 1984, 1986, 1989), (Morocco, January 1984, 1996), Sudan (March 1985,) Algeria (October 1988, 1997), Tunisia (1984, 1986; Jordan, April 1989) and Yemen (1985, 1988, 1995).

In addition to these major events, localized, small scale food riots have occurred throughout 1990s and 2000s in all these countries. They were invariably provoked by austerity measures linked to one form or another of structural adjustments, stabilization, liberalization and privatization programmes that resulted in the gradual

withdrawal of subsidy to popular food commodities (sugar, tea, kerosene, flour, bread) and sudden escalation in food and fuel prices.

### I FOOD RIOTS: THE ARAB EXPERIENCE

In the past, governments had succeeded in containing the spontaneous outbursts of crowds by a combination of force and temporary special measures including hikes in salary, strengthening the distribution mechanism, reduction in tax, restoring partial subsidy or placing a ban on the export of essential food commodities.

Nonetheless, the five fold rise in bread price led to serious food riots in Egypt that claimed eleven lives in April 2008 after clash with the army. The government response included allocating \$ 2.5 billion of its new budget for bread subsidies, imposing a ban on rice exports, and ordering the army to bake and distribute bread to the poor. Public sector wages were also increased by 30 percent. In October 1980 Morocco embarked on a second stabilization programme and concluded an agreement with the IMF according to which the food subsidies were reduced and that had led to 50 per cent increase in the prices of essential consumer goods. Again these price increases had sparked widespread riots in Casablanca in the spring of 1981 and, together with other factors such as drought and falling phosphate prices, forced the government to abandon the programme.

More recently in May 2008 violent protests over the cost of bread prompted the Morocco government to annual a 30 per cent hike so as to avoid the 1981

Casablanca riots. In Algeria, a 15 per cent salary increase for civil servants was introduced in response to a doubling of the price of cooking oil, sugar, and flour. In Tunisia also the "bread riots" in January 1984, were strong enough to force the policy makers to repeal the reduction in food subsidy. Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, have established non-governmental organizations and community sponsored project for the creation of jobs and provisions of additional training and health services.

However the global rise in price of food commodities in last five years has hit the Arab world—particularly the non-oil nations—much more strongly than other parts of the world. With little arable land and scarce water supplies, the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region imports more food per capita than any other, accounting for 25-50 per cent of national consumption. It cost the government exchequer heavily as the import bill of food was raised significantly. In fact if one excludes the rich Gulf states, most Arab countries substantially increased the import of agricultural products and foodstuff in 1990 from 1980—and in terms of the magnitude Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia stand at the apex of the list.

The food share in the households' budget remains very significant, hence food subsidies had an immediate and direct impact on livelihood of the household and its standard of living, and it therefore had a net redistributive effects. According to Morrisson, food subsidies constituted 20 per cent of the expenditure of the urban poor households in Morocco. Since the poor spent 80 per cent of their budget on food, their food consumption is likely to have fallen by one-quarter without subsidies. On an average, the Moroccan family spend 40 per cent of its annual income on food. In rural Egypt also, the reliance on food subsidies was substantial. At the national level, food amounts to 50 per cent of the Egyptian households' consumption. About 40 million (of 83m) Egyptians rely on ration cards and

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that the bread-subsidy system is riddled with corruption.

## II UNDERSTANDING THE ARAB UPRISING

With high level of consumption pattern, food subsidy occupies an important position in the economies of the Arab countries and becomes a volatile issue in the context of demographic changes: high population growth with significant portion below working age, large family size, high rate of unemployment, and the widening gap between rich and poor. In the Arab region, where at least 20 per cent of the total population is between 15 and 24 years, each year over 5,00,000 enter the labor market, the vast majority are in the age cohort of 15-24. However, youth unemployment rates in this region are much higher than adult unemployment rates, averaging 27.3 per cent in 2007. It accounts for 54.2 per cent of total unemployment (more than 70 per cent of unemployment in Jordan, Mauritania, Yemen as well as Egypt) and is considered as the highest in the world. Moreover, most unemployed are educated. The ratio of secondary and tertiary graduated in total unemployed is over 51 per cent in Tunisia, 44 per cent in Morocco and 34 per cent in Algeria

The relative material deprivation combined with a perceived sense of injustice of the regime as reflected in the form of high corruption, growing Americanization of Arab world after 9/11 and its moral-political bankruptcy on the Palestinian issue has ignited the long wounded Arabs on the street. The flight of Ben Ali, the reclusive dictator of Tunisia, in view of small scale protests lifted the fear of Arab autocratic regimes and provided a big moral solace to the people to come out in the street against the regime.

Edward Thompson's conception of 'the moral economy of poor' has direct relevance for understanding this 'discontent' in contemporary Arab world. According to Thompson, food protests are not merely 'rebellions of the belly' or responses to economic hardship by the working class, but expressions of loss of the right to livelihood and economic justice, which had been hitherto partly legitimated by states seen as paternalistic. In all such cases, these intifada amount to protests against social inequality, corruption, nepotism, authoritarianism and the regime's incompetence. It is this 'moral economy of poor' that common Arab

masses across the Arab world emphasize while opposing the policies of incumbent governments.

The issue of food subsidy as a part of the social contract has been expressed, mostly in Egypt, by claiming that 'bread is not an economic commodity; it is a social and political commodity'. The social imagery of this contract is best encapsulated by the popular Maghribi saying, *nakul al-qut nistanna al-mut* (food we eat, until death we meet) and the Arab term *dimuqratiyyat al-khubz* (democracy of bread).

### Nature of Arab Protest

Though the economic, social and political malice provides a common background for the 'street discontents' in the Arab world, 'particularity' of each Arab countries explains the differences in nature, thrust and intensity of the protest movement in each country.

In Tunisia, the act of self immolation of vegetable vendor captured national attention and mobilized the segment of lower middle class youth against the Ben Ali government. The anger burst out in Egypt for three reasons: first, the closure of Rafa border by Mubarak government in 2010- in view of Israeli blockade of Gaza - that used to provide the only outlet to the people of Gaza to bring food and other necessary commodity for day to day life. The military junta, after taking over the government, quickly opened the Rafa border and played significant role in bringing HAMAS and PLO faction together in forming the unity government in Palestine. Second, the Presidential and Parliamentary election that took place in 2007 and 2008 respectively lacked serious legitimacy as it was considered rigged. Third, since Camp David Treaty (1978) and Egypt-Israeli Peace and Friendships Treaty(1977), the average Egyptian lost the national- self esteem.

The social and political unrest in Egypt provided context and inspiration to other deprived section of the Arab world to rise up against their respective governments. In Yemen, one of the poorest country of the Arab world, national anger is partly directed against the bad governance of more than 30 years of Saleh rule. In Syria, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia the Arab protest is mainly sectarian in nature as against 'national' in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. In Syria, it is the majority Sunni (85 per cent) revolt against 15 per cent Shitte Alwaite minority ruling class for greater representation in power structure of the country, while in Bahrain it was mainly Shii

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majority that was agitating the Sunni monarchy and ruling class for its ill treatment. In Saudi Arabia the dissident mainly came from Shii minority located in its eastern part to protest against the Saudi- Wahabi regime's policy of religious, social, economic and political discrimination. In Libya the protest to Qaddafi regime was mainly 'regional' and 'tribal' in nature - mostly confined to tribal belts of Syranica where Qaddafi's rule has historically been weak and without substantial social support - before getting transformed in civil war, thanks to the West that saw the Arab uprising as golden opportunity to get rid off 'the bad guy'. In Iran, the opposition seized the opportunity arising out of 'Arab uprising' mainly to regain its legitimacy that it had gradually lost in a series of confrontation with what it considered as 'illegal rule of Ahmadinejad'.

### III TOWARDS DEMOCRATISATION?

Many commentators see this popular outburst as beginning of real democratic transformation of Islamic West Asian and North African Countries. Only time will testify this predicament. Given the global stake in the stability of this region and the nature of civil society-state relationship, one needs to be critical, whether this leaderless, popular outburst, though largely peaceful, has any democratic vision and will therefore lead to any genuine democratic transformation of this region or not. However, it will certainly lead to some political reform in the region in the direction of greater democratic openness, increased transparency, enhanced governance and increased popular participation.

In context of the Arab world, despite highly vibrant local participation and expression of discontent, the vertical channels that link states and societies have historically been cut off and failed to develop a culture of negotiation and accommodation. The



majority of states have not only obliterated institutional channels on interaction with social actors- whether Islamic or non-Islamic, but have also persistently undermined alternative pathways of negotiation. In the shadow of authoritarian rule the social actors were either muted or left only with the option of insurgency or sporadic protest in order to make themselves heard by unresponsive rulers. Hence, neither the state nor social actor\forces can be seen as the inherent enemies or friends of civil society and democracy in the Arab world. Islam or other social actors or state may come to support democracy for different reasons that have little to do with democratic values or genuine desire for democratization.

#### IV IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

What are the implications of 'current Arab discontents for India? How did the Indian government react to this event?

A stable Arab world, particularly the stability of Persian Gulf, is crucial for India's sustained higher rate of growth and development. As Indian economy becomes more export oriented and more integrated with globalised economy it would like to synchronize its foreign policy posturing with the leading powers of the world, particularly with the US with whom it shares a whole range of interests that are structurally vital for India's security, growth and development. Seen from this perspective, its approach towards Arab uprising as 'wait and watch', not too supporting to 'people's protest', neither endorsing the regime's brutal suppression of these protests and offering mild criticism to the western intervention in Libya is a pragmatic one and serves India's national interest.

However there are deeper regional implications of this 'Arab uprising' that India needs to seriously engage with. First, it is likely to result in the realignment of political forces at regional level that will strengthen the forces of 'pan-Arabism' against Israel. Under the convulsion of people's pressure the issue of 'Arab pride' with 'liberation of Palestine' at its centre is bound to resurface at the regional level in near future. Therefore India needs to avoid a close identification with Israel. India still has remarkable good will in the region which it might lose if it continues to ally itself too closely with

United States and Israel. India needs to maintain a 'strategic autonomy' vis- a vis United States and must reorient her ties with the Arab world as an indispensable component of her strategic autonomy and commercial exigencies and create a new discourse in line with the evolving norms of Arabism.

Second, the Arab uprising has tremendously helped Turkey to increase its influence in the region. Turkey has enormous influence in North Africa and Central Asia and has started refiguring in the Arab world. With Turkey's series of anti-Israel stand and its shifting focus towards normalizing relationship with countries of Arab world and Iran in recent years, the 'Turkish model of democracy' has gained public attention in the Arab world.

As this model is premised on an idea of fine balance between military and civil society, the West sees in this model as an alternative to Arab autocracies that have lost total legitimacy in the eyes of people of Arab world and therefore, are not reliable anymore to protect the western interest. However, these will not be democratic enough to challenge the western hegemony in the region. India therefore, needs to strengthen its ties with Turkey. A strong tie with Turkey will help India in protecting its security, political and commercial interest in Central Asia. It appears that Turkey is more than willing to expand its commercial venture in South and Southeast Asian countries through India, while allowing the Indian commercial interest in North Africa and Central Asia through Turkey.

Third, the civilian protest in Bahrain quickly became a flashpoint for regional leadership between Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Islamic Republic of Iran. The rivalry for regional leadership between Saudi Arabia and Iran along the line of sectarian identity-Sunni and Shii is likely to increase in coming years. Given that India has heavy stake in Persian Gulf in terms of hydrocarbon, remittances, service, and trade it needs to maintain a delicate diplomatic balance between these two regional rival nations.

Fourth, as the region is pregnant with uncertain future India needs to diversify its sources of hydrocarbons and must prepare a contingency plan to look after the six million diaspora located in the Arab region.