

PROSPECTS OF ARAB SPRING IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Discontentment over current political, economic and security situation looms large at a time when a great many Pakistanis face the hardships of poverty, unemployment and unprecedented inflation. Those who want to bring about a change in the situation find hope in the Arab Spring phenomenon in which millions of people stood up against oppressive dictatorships and seemed to have taken power in their own hands. This paper looks at the similarities and dissimilarities between the Arab countries where uprisings have succeeded in toppling the regimes and Pakistan. It also analyses the prospects if any of an uprising in Pakistan.

Key Words: Arab Spring, Arab world, Pakistan, Uprisings.

Introduction

*I*n 2010-11 the Middle East and North African region (MENA) were shaken by popular uprisings against dictatorial regimes. With the participation of millions of people the protests and demonstrations lasted for weeks and months and in a few cases met with success with the fall of the dictator. This unique development was watched by a world that only days before had regarded the regimes stable. Many in Pakistan contemplate whether the domino effect will hit the Pakistani nation or not. Is there an Arab Spring in the making in Pakistan? What is it that will trigger a popular uprising here? These and related questions will be addressed in this paper. This would require an understanding of the circumstances and the situation in the concerned Arab countries and the causes or events that led to the uprisings there.

Factors at Play in the Arab Spring

The underlying causes of these uprisings varied from country to country. “There has of course been no uniform script for the Arab Regimes in play.”¹

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Different factors dominated the scene in different countries. However as Arabs “rose up against their sclerotic masters” their initial focus and target was ousting the dictators; the common voice across the Arab World was “the people want to topple the regime.”² The simultaneity of the uprisings in the Arab world and the relatively similar pattern³ of protests led many to lump the phenomenon under a single term like Arab Spring, Twitter Revolution, Arab Revolution and Arab Awakening; Arab Spring being the most commonly one used.

Arab Spring was a response to a complex mix of issues that had been at work for long—decades-long repressive political rule, lack of freedom, socio-economic injustices etc. Jack A. Goldstone wrote “the revolutions of 2011 are fighting...Sultanistic dictatorships.”⁴ These rulers exercised absolute powers and denied the people their due civil and political rights. High level of corruption, patronage and nepotism, repression, denial of information and restriction on communication, and intimidation forced the common people to come out on the streets. The socio-economic injustices suffered through decades in the shape of unemployment, poverty, inequality, had become intolerable. Unemployment level in these countries on the eve of the protests stood at 9.7 per cent in Egypt, 14 per cent in Tunisia and 30 per cent in Libya.⁵ Inflation, particularly the food-price inflation, ran amok; in Egypt families spent 40 per cent of their income on food.⁶ In Yemen 38.59 per cent people lived below the poverty line;⁷ 25.2 per cent⁸ In Egypt. Tales of corruption related to these regimes were endless. In Tunisia, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and his family owned a large number of companies and real estate;

¹ Foud Ajami, “The Arab Spring at One: A Year of Living Dangerously,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 61.

² *Ibid.*, 56.

³ There were many similarities amongst these uprisings but the differences were also there.

⁴ Jack A. Goldstone, “Understanding the Revolutions of 2011,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 3 (May/Jun2011): 8-16.

⁵ Lisa Evans, “Tunisia: How Does It Compare to Other Countries in the Region?,” *Guardian Datablog*, January 20, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/datablog/2011/jan/18/tunisia-data-store#> (accessed May 28, 2012).

⁶ IISS Strategic Comments, “Bread and Protests: the Return of High Food Prices,” *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, <http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/past-issues/volume-17-2011/march/bread-and-protests-the-return-of-high-food-prices/mobile-edition/> (accessed June 6, 2012).

⁷ “Poverty Reduction United Nations Development Programme Republic of Yemen,” *UNDP*, <http://www.undp.org/ye/poverty.php> (accessed May 26, 2012).

⁸ Sherine Abdel-Razek, “Poverty in Egypt,” *Al-Abram Weekly*, February 9-15, 2011, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2012/1084/ec1.htm> (accessed May 21, 2012).

Ben Ali and his wife were called “Ceausescus” by the Tunisian people after the repressive and corrupt Romanian dictator and his wife.⁹

The unanticipated developments and their stunning pace took everybody by surprise. The rule of dictators and monarchs spanned over decades had become more of a permanent element in the politics of the Arab World. Those that espoused democracy in the west, particularly the United States, continued to “adhere to conventional wisdom about the low likelihood of popular rebellion.”¹⁰ Many others shared the same thought and believed in the “durability of the authoritarian regimes.”¹¹

Another hallmark of these uprisings was the mass demonstrations and protests using public spaces and central squares. Goldstone believes “a broad-based section of the population, spanning ethnic and religious groups and socioeconomic classes, must mobilize” if the revolutions have to succeed.¹² People from all walks of life took to the streets in the Arab World. In fact the participation of ordinary people including women is a feature that stands out in these demonstrations.¹³

The participation of the youth in large number was also important. The youth makes for a large portion of the population in the Arab world. High level of education coupled with youth unemployment, 23 per cent on average in the region, was one of the major factors behind the rebellion according to a representative of International Labour Organization (ILO).¹⁴ The increase in youth population increases the chances of social turbulence, particularly if it increases more rapidly than job opportunities and unemployment increases. The “youth has played a prominent role in political violence throughout recorded history; the existence of a youth bulge has historically been associated with times of political crisis.”¹⁵ This is primarily because young people are more liberal and have the tendency to defy authority.

The greater connectivity among people through internet, mobile phones and social media also played a role. However, terms like Twitter Revolution

⁹ Sudarsan Raghavan, “In Tunisia, Luxurious Lifestyle of a Corrupt Government,” *Washington Post*, January 28, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/28/AR2011012801921.html> (accessed May 26, 2012).

¹⁰ Augustus Richard Norton, “Arab Revolts Upend Old Assumptions,” *Current History*, *Journal of Contemporary World Affairs*, Global Trends (January 2012): 14-18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Goldstone, “Understanding the Revolutions of 2011.”

¹³ Marcelo Lopes de Souza and Barbara Lipietz, “The Arab Spring and the City Hopes, Contradictions and Spatiality,” *CITY*, vol. 15, no. 6 (December 2011): 618-624.

¹⁴ “Youth Unemployment in the Arab World is a Major Cause for Rebellion,” *International Labour Organization*, http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/insight/WCMS_154078/lang--en/index.htm (accessed May 27, 2012).

¹⁵ Jack A Goldstone, “Demography, Environment, and Security: An Overview,” in *Demography and National Security*, ed. Myron Weiner and Sharon Shanton Russel, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 47.

overplayed the role of social media. Many scholars considered social media as a causal variable in these uprisings rather than an intermediary one. The role of social media, significant in itself, was more of an instrument or a tool.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it underlined the fact that communication can outsmart information control. The role of *WikiLeaks* in triggering the Arab Spring is noteworthy.¹⁷

The role played by the military in these uprisings cannot be overlooked. While in Tunisia, the Army Chief straightaway refused the orders of Ben Ali to suppress the protestors; in Egypt the Army took long to back the protestors. Without the backing of militaries, the uprisings would not have succeeded. “No revolution within a state can succeed without the support or at least acquiescence of its armed forces.”¹⁸

Replicating the Arab Spring in Pakistan

The spread of protests and demonstrations across the Arab world highlighted the fact that ideas travel fast and transcend boundaries. However, “ideas that are free-floating, unattached to a more general perspective or value system are not very likely to have tremendous impact.”¹⁹ Common grievances can make people to take action and turn into a force. Below we will analyze what Pakistani nation has in common with the Arab countries that could spark an uprising.

Similar to Arab countries, Pakistan faces a number of problems. Poor governance, corruption, inflation, unemployment, and poverty are but just a few of these problems. Inflation tops the list of key problems faced by Pakistanis according to a poll conducted by Gilani and Gallup Pakistan, followed by unemployment.²⁰ The number of unemployed people forms six per cent of the population according to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2011-12.²¹ Although unofficial figures differ and put unemployment level at a much

¹⁶ Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, “The Role of Digital Media,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 22 no. 3 (July 2011): 35.

¹⁷ Norton, “Arab Revolts Upend Old Assumptions,” 15.

¹⁸ Zoltan Barany, “The Role of the Military,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 22, no. 4 (October 2011): 24.

¹⁹ December Green and Laura Luehrmann, “From Ideas to Action: The Power of Civil Society,” in *Comparative Politics of the Third World Linking Concepts and Cases* (New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd., 2004), 187.

²⁰ 52 per cent of the population thinks that inflation is their biggest problem and 26 per cent of the population think that unemployment is the most important issue facing Pakistan. “Most Important Problem Ladder at Personal, Local and National Level,” *Gallup*, <http://www.gallup.com.pk/Polls/270212.pdf> (accessed June 1, 2012).

²¹ “Population, Labour Force and Employment,” *Pakistan Economic Survey 2011-12*, Government of Pakistan, 172.

higher figure. The rising level of inflation is also a problem. As of April 2012, the inflation level measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) was 11.3 per cent while food inflation stood at 10.7 per cent.²² Although unemployment and inflation are not as high as they were in Arab world, they have the potential to cause instability if they continue to grow further pushing people to the tipping point.

Youth in Pakistan, that is the population under 25 years of age, is 63 per cent of the total population. The youth literacy rate for ages between 15 and 24 is 53 per cent.²³ These two factors—youth population and youth unemployment make Pakistan much vulnerable to an Arab Spring like phenomenon.

The political culture in any society is modified through enhanced communications made possible through technological developments as witnessed in the Arab world. With the mushrooming of digital media outlets and cellular networks, the level of communication has enhanced manifold. The teledensity in Pakistan during the year 2011-12 stands at 68.3 per cent.²⁴ Pakistan has a free and independent media and plays a big role in moulding public opinion. If an Arab like situation ever to arise in Pakistan both the free media and cell phones would play a decisive role in building the movement.

With above noted figures and facts, it is easy to make out that the situation in Pakistan is similar to pre-uprising Arab World except for the former's open media which plays a cathartic role in keeping passions subdued. However, unlike the Arab world the culture of demonstrations and protests has been part of the country's political life since its inception. People have taken to the streets time and again to make demands and complaints to the authorities. Recently protests, demonstrations and rallies have been seen in response to energy crisis in Pakistan and against the NATO attack on Salala military check post on Pak-Afghan border in November 2011. The power crisis in the country results in protests in Pakistan almost daily. There is a fair chance that protests are going to take on a more violent character if the energy crisis worsens.

After the long rule of President Pervez Musharraf, the military in Pakistan has been careful in staying out of politics. The neutral role of the military during the judicial crisis showed that military does not aspire for power. Keeping the present trends in mind, the military in Pakistan may not interfere if an Arab Spring like phenomenon springs up in Pakistan and will let the things run their course.

²² "Inflation," *Pakistan Economic Survey 2011-12*, Government of Pakistan, 100.

²³ "UNDP and the Youth," *United Nations Development Programme Pakistan*, <http://undp.org.pk/undp-and-the-youth.html> (accessed June 4, 2012).

²⁴ "Transport and Communication," *Pakistan Economic Survey 2011-12*, Government of Pakistan, 184.

Possible Impediments to Arab Spring in Pakistan

There are a number of commonalities between Pakistan and the Arab world. Yet, the possibility of an impending Arab Spring seems remote in Pakistan. Despite the alternating democracy and military rules in Pakistan; the Pakistanis have enjoyed far more political freedom than the people in the Arab world. Even the military dictators in Pakistan have not been total autocrats. In order to give some semblance of a democratic system they have had to undertake democratic measures such as holding elections, etc.

There are many forms of political participation²⁵ which the people of Pakistan have availed of from time to time. In its written form this participation has appeared in newspaper columns, letters to the editor, editorial comment, publicly displayed posters or graffiti and petitions to government. The civil society has also been vocal in Pakistan except during times of harsh government restrictions. The advocacy-focused Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are working for social and economic change. Many social ills are brought to notice by these NGOs and many issues are being legislated upon by the government. Participation in social, economic and political systems has also been open to people in Pakistan except for the times when civilian or military governments barred them from. Elections, political parties, labour and student unions have similarly served as forums for public participation. Though Pakistan has not seen a grand social movement that has overturned the political or economic system altogether, yet the country has witnessed many uprisings. The latest being the movement for the reinstatement of the judiciary. After the Chief Justice of Pakistan was dismissed in March 2007 by the then President Musharraf, people from all segments of the society came together in an effort to restore the judiciary. Spanned over a two-year long struggle, the movement succeeded in restoring the judiciary. The instances noted above show that Pakistani people have been able to express their grievances and vent their anger through various channels available to them. These channels were not available to the people in the Arab world; hence things are not as gloomy in Pakistan as they were in the Arab world. Open media is also critical in giving people a platform to express their views. Over the years, the level of political freedom has increased; as many as 58 per cent of the Pakistanis believe that they have greater freedom to speak than ten years ago.²⁶ In fact, many believe that “independence of judiciary and freedom of the media are two revolutions that have already taken place in Pakistan.”²⁷

²⁵ December Green and Laura Luehrmann, “From Ideas to Action,” 211-221.

²⁶ “Political Freedoms in Pakistan,” *Gallup*, <http://www.gallup.com.pk/Polls/131211.pdf>. (accessed June 1, 2012).

²⁷ Mazhar Abbas, “Pakistan’s Arab Spring and the Media,” *Express Tribune*, May 26, 2012.

The amazing feature of the Arab uprisings was the high level of participation by the people from all walks of life irrespective of any divisions based on class or creed or even on gender. Unfortunately, another hold up to Arab Spring in Pakistan comes from the divisions in the society. The people are divided along ethnic, sectarian and gender lines. Women make for half of the population in Pakistan thus making their role critical in any social movement or uprisings. However, women in Pakistan have never become a force to reckon with. To get them all on a point of convergence will require a cause that is supported by all and most probably will be of national character such as defence of the nation or a religious cause.

Conclusion

Pakistan does share much common ground with the Arab world in terms of issues like inflation, unemployment, large youth population and rule of military dictators for nearly half of its nascent history. However, Pakistanis have been freer politically than the Arabs. They have had openings for letting out the steam, not keeping their frustrations pent up. The Arab Spring in Pakistan is unlikely at this point in time; Pakistanis have not reached the tipping point. However this should not lead us to the conclusion that Pakistanis suffer from apathy. In fact the Arab Spring is taking place in Pakistan in pockets as witnessed in the protest rallies that often turn rowdy and pose law and order situations. A large social movement can only come about if there is a cause that binds the whole nation together. But if the democratic process continues and democracy flourishes in its true sense in Pakistan, the Arab Spring may never come to Pakistan. ■