

# Winds of change sweep the Arab world



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► *Pro-democracy movements are spreading from one Arab country to the next. India should safeguard its interests even as it stands for democratic principles.*



The list of countries vulnerable to the "Middle East democracy" contagion ranges from Morocco in the West to Iran in the East.

Over the past few weeks, the Arab world has seen large-scale public demands for political reforms and democratisation on an unprecedented scale. First, Tunisia and then Egypt have seen long-standing authoritarian regimes yielding to large-scale, peaceful public demonstrations for political reforms. Countries such as Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain are in the throes of a contest between the regimes and the public, with the outcome still to be decided.

The current, evolving situation raises several important questions. What are the common factors, if any, behind this movement? What are the possible outcomes of the demand for political reforms? How will this ongoing struggle impact the outside world, and the interests of key powers in the region, including India?

What should be the role of countries and institutions committed to liberal democracy in this situation? Answers to these questions are complex and difficult, given the diversity in history, culture, and politics of the Arab world.

## DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

The diversity in the Arab region is reflected in the varying assessment of political freedom enjoyed in different countries, ranging from Morocco in the west to Iran in the east. This is itself the result of interplay of historical, religious and political factors.

Some of these are: The breaking up of the Ottoman Empire, Islamic diversity, the competition for influence during the Cold War and thereaf-

ter, the continuing dispute over Palestine, the post-9/11 war on terror focused on Islamic extremist groups in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the continuing effort to access and control natural resources in the region, especially oil and gas. According to Freedom House, which assesses civil and political rights on a scale from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free), most of the countries in West Asia are classified as not free, except for Lebanon, Kuwait, Turkey (partly free), and Israel (free).

Clearly, there is a substantial democracy deficit in most of West Asia. In many cases, authoritarian regimes were the by-product of the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, and the desire of colonial powers to have friendly regimes in the region.

## US INVOLVEMENT

This trend continued during the Cold War period, with the US forging strong links with such regimes in the region, while also enabling US interests to benefit from natural resource endowments of countries.

US support to authoritarian regimes in Turkey, Greece, Spain and Portugal is another example of this realpolitik. The US-UK supported anti-Mossadegh coup in Iran in 1953 illustrates the predominance of strategic and economic interests of the West, at the cost of strangling democracy. It is a

matter of poetic justice that the Iranian revolution of 1979 started a process of challenge to US strategic interests in the region that persists today.

The end of the Cold War and the wave of democratic reforms in East Europe should have resulted in a 'democratic dividend' in West Asia.

However, the US support for Israel, and the need to have friendly regimes in the face of popular criticism of US policies, access to cheap oil and gas, and the need for military bases, resulted in the US adopting an anomalous attitude to authoritarian regimes in the region.

Only the Left-inspired Baathist regimes in Iraq and Syria, the Libyan regime, and later on the Iranian regime were held to be adversaries and targets for criticism on issues of human rights and democratic freedom.

After 9/11, the war on terror made the US even more eager for support from friendly regimes in the region, including Pakistan.

## SITUATION IN EGYPT

It is not surprising that the removal of authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt has caused consternation and concern in the US.

The Obama administration has wisely followed a policy of cautious encouragement to peaceful public protests calling for political reforms, while condemning violence un-

leashed by the security forces. At the same time it remains watchful over the activities of Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

The future regime in Egypt even if influenced by the military, is likely to be much more broad-based and politically inclusive, and less supportive of US policy towards Israel.

The important priority at present is to get the constitutional changes finalised, hold free and fair elections and get the country's economic life normalised. India has wisely and quietly offered to help Egypt in this process.

The ongoing turmoil in Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen would result in some concessions being made in the direction of political reforms.

## CONTAGION EFFECT

The list of countries vulnerable to the "Middle East democracy" contagion is long – Morocco, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Iran. The vulnerability of large oil producing countries has worried the oil markets and large fluctuations in prices are likely.

Iran remains a paradox. Its regime is the result of a struggle against authoritarianism, but has in turn become authoritarian.

The institution of a supreme leader for life, above any criticism whatsoever, able to appoint the Guardian Council, which in turn vets all candidates for elections including

the Assembly of experts, which in turn elects the Supreme Leader, is basically non-democratic.

Syria presents another paradox. Its regime, nominally Baathist, is in reality controlled by a condominium of military and civil leaders, some from the small relatively backward Shia Alawite minority to which the Assad family belongs.

Syrians are a proud people, tracing their heritage back 2500 years, and the Muslim Brotherhood has fertile grounds for operation among its Sunni population. Some movement towards liberal democracy, albeit closely controlled will be inevitable.

The Arab world is in the throes of political change, in some cases through a revolution, in others through evolution, as authoritarian regimes scramble to adjust to the new reality of aggressive and articulate demands for political reform, under the watchful gaze of the international community.

India will have to navigate these troubled waters carefully, balancing its interests against its own democratic ideals. In the field of constitutional reforms, and electoral processes, India could be well placed to render relevant assistance to countries that need it.

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