

# Some Lessons from the Arab Spring

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## 1) The first one is that the economy matters

With the looming third anniversary of Arab Spring, it is fair to look at some of the key non-political reasons causing this defining moment.

As such, informal economy served as the starting point. Mohamed Bouazizi, who could not find a suitable job for a graduate, worked as a street vendor when a municipal official and her aides decided to confiscate, harass and humiliate him on charges of not having a proper license and doing business in a public area.

In protest, he set himself ablaze and later passed away from sustained injuries. Certainly, the rest is history. Subsequent public anger forced President Bin Ali to step down and to flee the country in early January 2011 following 23 years in power.

As such, it is not unfair to claim that informal economy or the economy at large laid the foundation for the Arab Spring, whose consequences continue to evolve to date. Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself a light and later passed away from sustained injuries, was doing a commercial activity when he was harassed.

2) With regards to Tunisia and Egypt, a combination of 1) unemployment amongst youths 2) inflationary pressures and 3) poverty have contributed to the sharp change (all in

double digits).

3) **Turning to Syria** use of force against those seeking change was a terrible mistake. Also, we have a case of a largely irresponsible opposition doing a lot of bad things. As a consequence, sadly more than 100,000 had lost their lives, half a million injured, 3 million displaced and a major physical damage to the country; the worst is not over yet.

1. The Syrian economy suffered from a jobless rate of 9 per cent according to official figures, but much higher by other sources 2) Could have much worse but for a characteristic of the Syrian population, namely that of appreciating business and thereby having preference of employees.
2. Chronic budgetary shortage, at times compromising 20 per cent of the revenues, necessitating making extraordinary friendship to get assistance

4) **Concerning Libya:** Misuse of the country's resources on ambitious political goals in the absence of checks and balances paved the way for a violent and clearly unstable change (separation tendencies of Bengazi)

5) **Yemen:** Exceptionally difficult economic situation, with 1) unemployment rate standing at 35 per cent, feared of getting worse with more than one third of locals being below 15 years of

age 2) poverty engulfing about 45 per cent of the nationals.

**6) Discrimination on any basis is wrong:**

This is something that Bahrain has learned; favouritism based on tribe, faith and ethnicity is not just wrong but not sustainable. Sadly, the problem or possibly the worst is not yet over in Bahrain.

Unlike Syria, political forces in Bahrain have largely avoided violent activities, but this is not necessarily true of some youths.

Wrongly, many countries insist on learning the hard way. It took the US and later South Africa sometime to learn that discrimination is simply wrong.

7) **In Oman**, the authorities were quick in responding to popular calls for socio-economic reforms.

From the onset, the challenge in Oman emerged as an economic one, with protestors selecting the industrial city of Sohar, with calls for ensuring availability of proper jobs for locals together with taking out measures against financial and administrative shortcomings.

Aware of the demands and in order to avoid Arab Spring problems, the authorities opted for numerous projects and initiatives at the cost of US\$2.6 billion.

The ambitious plan called for creating some 56,000 jobs, divided between 36,000 and 20,000 employment opportunities in public and private sectors, respectively. Other measures called for a monthly payment of \$390 for Omani nationals actively seeking employment as well as enhancement of retirement entitlements.

The amount, compromising about 12 per cent of the budget in 2011 meant no waste

by being infused into the local economy with positive spillover effects to different economic sectors. Also, extra spending came at the time of steady oil prices.

By one report, the jobless rate amongst nationals stands at about 15 per cent of eligible Omani nationals. Yet, actual figures are believed to be higher in rural areas and amongst females (**relatively high partly because some locals insist on accepting certain types of jobs**).

Available demographic statistics are alarming with nearly 43 per cent of local population being below 15 years of age.

Moreover, the drive for pressing locals to accept jobs in the private sector was timely. Not long ago, labour officials raised the minimum wage for locals working in the private sector establishments by 43 per cent to \$520 per month, a notable change.

The new move followed a decision made two years ago designed to restrict issuance of visas to foreign workers in certain professions. These entail import and export, cleaning, barbershop, laundry, electronic repair, garbage cleaning and selling, textile shops, mobile shops, health clubs, workshops in aluminium, iron, wood, car repair, tailoring shops and beauty parlours.

At least, some Omani nationals like to assume these jobs in the private sector in line with Vision 2020. The vision stipulates that nationals should seek employment opportunities in private rather than public sector entities.

8) **Regarding Saudi Arabia**, in March 2011, King Abdullah showed personal interest in addressing the unemployment challenge via a combination of monetary incentives and administrative efforts. On the one hand,

he ordered financial support for unemployed youths for a span of one year for the unemployed as part of US\$130 billion schemes designed to boost spending in the Kingdom.

On the other, the monarch called for setting up of a high-level ministerial committee to find solutions for unemployment problem facing graduates (later introduced the *Nitaqat* project). The committee is due to present specific recommendations to the monarch in July. Ostensibly, King Abdullah's move comes amidst alarming statistics indicating that 44 per cent of jobless Saudis have college degrees.

The retail industry for one is considered capable of creating a large number of opportunities for locals. Currently, Saudi nationals assume 270,000 out of 1.4 million employment opportunities in the industry. Still, the number of jobs in retail enterprises is projected to rise to 2 million in 2020, half of which could go to Saudis.

The move partly reflects the fact that the Saudi economy is capable of producing millions of jobs, though most of which end up for expatriates. Saudi job market boasts between 8 and 8.5 million expatriates versus 4.5 million locals.

According to figures attributed the Ministry of Economy and Planning, some 416,000 Saudi nationals are actively jobs, representing about 9 per cent of total Saudi workforce.

With regards to gender, males and females make up 239,000 and 177,000 of jobless Saudis, respectively. This suggests that males are exerting more efforts than females in securing jobs.

Clearly, Saudi officials use the international standards of restricting unemployment statistics

to those actively seeking jobs.

It is fair to assume that some educated females notably those married and have children drop interest in working and hence are not considered unemployed.

Not surprisingly, unemployment is primarily a problem amongst females. The jobless rate amongst females stood at 25 per cent.

In 2007, the jobless stood at nearly 11 per cent, and ever since has been declining partly through Saudization of certain jobs.

Demographic facts add to jobless pressures. Some 38 per cent of Saudis are below the age of 14 and thus many youths would enter the job market in the years to come looking for suitable employment opportunities.

Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs restricts some 40 types of jobs to nationals. These include taxi drivers, training and purchasing managers, public relations officers, administrative assistants, secretaries, operators, debt collectors, customer service accountants, tellers, postmen, data handlers, librarians, booksellers, ticket kiosk keepers, auto salesmen, janitors, internal mail handlers and tour guides. Officials contend that Saudis prefer such professions. However, such restrictions are not popular with the business community, in turn considered as interference in the way employers make decisions.

At any rate, Saudi authorities should be commended for admitting the extent of unemployment encountering the kingdom, as knowing is much better than not knowing. Admission of a problem is the first the step towards seeking possible solutions.

## **9) Costs and benefits**

A study by HSBC shows that the GDP or gross

domestic product of 7 Arab countries could have been higher by some \$800 billion by end-2014 but for emergence of Arab Spring. In total, a loss of 35 per cent of potential rise of GDP of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Bahrain;

The talk is about loss of output, revenues and economic opportunities.

Someone's loss is somebody else's gain: Most GCC economies have indirectly benefited from the Arab Spring

1) Saudi Arabia in terms of increasing oil output to about 10 million barrels per day (extra capacity of 2 million barrels per day) together with steady oil prices.

Result allowing for more than doubling of revenues in 2011 from \$144 billion to \$296 billion; in turn, stronger income allowed for increasing spending from \$155 billion to \$214 billion.

2) Likewise, the UAE notably Abu Dhabi enjoying extra treasury revenues, in turn allowing for enhancing the country's sovereign wealth fund SWF (now standing at above \$800 billion), thereby competing with China and Norway for leadership.

3) Dubai somehow recovering from the adverse effects of its 2008-09 debt crisis. The tourism and hospitality sectors gaining the most (hotels packed, influx of Saudis, shopping malls remaining open during holidays like Eid Al Haj). Egypt has lost a good part of its tourism industry.

4) Mismanagement of the situation is costing Bahrain in terms of competitiveness; there were times when a new Islamic bank would naturally select Bahrain as its base, but not nowadays. Currently, Bahrain is rivalry from three cities

starting with the letter D (Dubai, Doha and Damman).

Recently, GIB or Gulf International Bank, historically based in Bahrain, has decided to relocate most of its businesses to Damman.

## **10) Reaching shores of India**

Fallout of Arab Spring has somehow reached the Indian shores notably the state of Kerala, home of the largest source of Indian workers to GCC countries.

Certainly, I am referring to the Nitaqat scheme in Saudi Arabia, which went into effect in July of this year designed to regulate the labour market partly to enhance employment position of its local citizens. Faced with a 10 per cent jobless rate, a youth population, saturation of employment in the government (in fact, there is the case of overstaffing), the authorities started first to stamping out foreign workers overstaying their visas and failing to correct their status.

## **Concluding thoughts**

Socio-economic causes cannot be overlooked when looking into the emergence of Arab Spring in late 2010, starting with Tunisia. Undoubtedly, those seeking changes did so primarily for the attainment of democratic reforms. The assumed understanding was that greater participation in decision-making paves the way for addressing outstanding socio-economic issues.

## **11) Looking forward, statistics are not the side of the authorities in the Arab nations:**

1. Relatively strong population growth rates of more than 3 per cent. Total population of Arab countries put at 350 million at the moment but projected to rise to 500 million by 2025.

2. Youths comprise about 60 per cent, thus many are expected to enter the job market seeking suitable jobs fitting their expectations.

**The way forward requires ensuring**

1) comprehensive participation in decision 2) presence of checks and balances institutions to

ensure transparency and subjects being aware of resources 3) equal opportunity, and no discrimination on any basis including females 4) active civil society 5) vivid media sources to shed lights on economic opportunities and challenges.

# Making Sense of the Saudi Flip Flop at the Security Council

Gulshan Dietl\*

On Thursday, 17 October, Saudi Arabia was given an uncontested seat at the United Nations Security Council.<sup>1</sup> The Saudi Ambassador to the United Nations welcomed it saying his country takes it “very seriously as a responsibility” and calling it “a reflection of a long-standing policy in support of moderation and in support of resolving disputes by peaceful means”. The Saudi media covered the story with jubilation. After all, the country had invested a lot in lobbying for it.

On Friday, 19 October, the Saudi Foreign Ministry posted a litany of accusations against the United Nations and declined to take the seat. A statement carried by the Saudi Press Agency said, “Work mechanisms and double standard on the Security Council prevent it from carrying out its duties and assuming its responsibilities in keeping world peace. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has no other option but to turn down Security Council membership until it is reformed and given the means to accomplish its duties and assume its responsibilities in preserving world peace and security.”<sup>2</sup> The statement was stunning.

The Saudis have always pursued quiet diplomacy, working behind the scenes. Grand gestures and spectacular actions are not their style. In fact, Saudi Arabia has never contested and taken a seat at the Security Council even though it is one of the founder members of the United Nations and even as it could have won a seat anytime it desired on the basis of influence it could have exerted and the largess it could have bestowed.

## Responses from the Saudis, the Arabs and the World Beyond

A month before the election, the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Feisal had declined to address the annual gathering of the UN General Assembly. Whether that was a signal of their intentions to decline the UN Security Council seat is not clear. Once the seat was declined, the influential Saudi voices welcomed the decision. Nawaf Obaid, who has served in various capacities with the Saudi establishment, wrote that the Saudis had decided to go their own way because they realised that traditional diplomatic forums are irrelevant to contemporary security

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1 Nigeria, Lithuania, Chile and Chad, together with Saudi Arabia, were also elected unopposed to the Security Council.

2 The then Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

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had similarly thrown his papers at the Security Council and walked out shouting, “Take your United Nations!” after the Indian military intervention and secession of Bangladesh in 1971.

issues in the region. According to him, therefore, “The only way the Arab world can make progress is through a collective security framework initially consisting of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and the GCC nations.”<sup>3</sup>

Hussein Shobokshi, a prominent journalist, wrote an article titled “Rejection is Better than Capitulation”. Published in the Saudi-backed daily *Sharq al-Awsat*, it argued that “By rejecting this seat in this manner, Saudi Arabia has increased its international stature” taking a principled stance on Syria and showing it is willing to make sacrifices for it.<sup>4</sup>

The Arab ambassadors at the United Nations held an emergency meeting to assess the implications of the Saudi action. A statement released at the end of the meeting expressed “respect and understanding” for the Saudi position, but added that it was crucial for Saudi Arabia to represent the Arab Muslim world on the Council “at this important and historical stage, specifically for the Middle East.” It called upon the Saudi leaders to “maintain their membership in the Security Council and continue their brave role in defending our issues specifically at the rostrum of the Security Council”.

In short, the Saudis at home and the Arabs in the neighbourhood supported the Saudi decision to decline the UNSC seat. There was a

faint hope among some that the decision might still be revisited.

Beyond the Arab world, France was the most supportive of the Saudi action. Romain Nadal, the spokesman of the French foreign ministry stated that France shared some of the Saudi criticisms of the United Nations and is proposing reforms to the Council’s veto system. “We have an ongoing dialogue on the subject of Syria with Saudi Arabia. We share its frustration after the Security Council’s paralysis”, he added.<sup>5</sup>

The British Deputy UN Ambassador Peter Wilson told the reporters that his team was seeking to understand what precisely the Saudis meant and was talking to them “to get a little bit more background on what lies behind this”. The Russians expressed surprise as well. They “were baffled by the reasons that the Kingdom gave to explain its position”, the Russian statement said. They were particularly shocked as the action came after the Russians had successfully brokered a deal under which Syria had agreed to surrender its chemical arsenal. The United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon said that he had received no official notification in this regard. He was looking forward to working very closely with the Kingdom on the Syrian issue, as also the issues of combating terrorism and nuclear proliferation, he said.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Nawaf Obaid, “Saudi Arabia Shifts to a More Activist Foreign Policy Doctrine”, *Al-Monitor*, 17 October 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/saudi-shifts-foreign-policy-doctrine.html> accessed on 13 January 2014.

4 Quoted in *Jerusalem Post*, 21 October 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Did-Saudi-Arabia-reject-UN-Security-Council-seat-to-uphold-honor-329297> Accessed on 14 February 2014.

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5 Elizabeth Dickinson, “Saudi Arabia Rejects Seat in United Nations Security Council”, *The National*, 18 October 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-rejects-seat-on-un-security-council>: Accessed on 16 February 2014.

6 Aya Batrawy and Edith M Lederer, “Saudi Arabia Rejects Security Council Seat, Castigates United Nations over Its Inability to Perform Its Duties”, *National Post*, 18 October 2013, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/10/18/saudi-arabia-rejects->

Unlike the near unanimous support from within the Arab world, the responses from the non-Arab world were varied and ranged all the way from support to surprise to the hint of an on-going effort to persuade the Saudis to recant on the move.

### **The Saudis Offer Explanations**

The Saudis have provided their own explanations even as the world media is in an overdrive with speculation. They have listed three major grievances. First, “Allowing the ruling regime in Syria to kill its people and burn them with chemical weapons in front of the entire world and without any deterrent or punishment is clear proof and evidence of the UN Security Council’s inability to perform its duties and shoulder its responsibilities,” the statement says. The Saudis have been extremely angry at three vetoes that Russia and China have cast to prevent sanctions on Syria.

Second, “The current continuation of the Palestinian cause without a just and lasting solution for 65 years, which resulted in several wars [and] threatened international peace and security, is irrefutable evidence and proof of the Security Council’s inability to carry out its duties and assume its responsibilities.” The Saudi generosity to the Palestinians has been commendable and the Fez Peace Plan authored by them is still relevant. Beyond this, however, they have done precious little to have made a difference. They have either been too insecure or too ineffectual in this regard.

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security-council-seat-castigates-united-nations-over-inability-to-perform-its-duties/ Accessed on 16 February 2014.

And third, “The failure of the Security Council to make the Middle East a free zone of all weapons of mass destruction, whether because of its inability to subdue the nuclear programs of all countries in the region, without exception, to the international control and inspection or to prevent any country in the region from possessing nuclear weapons, is another irrefutable evidence and proof of its inability to carry out its duties and hold its responsibilities.” For decades, the Saudis have lived under the shadow of the Israeli nuclear arsenal. It is only their fear of an Iranian nuclear capability, sometime in a distant future, that they have woken up to the threat of weapons of mass destruction in their neighbourhood. A few years back, the Saudi-funded Gulf Research Centre had floated an ingenious formula of the “Gulf as a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone” (GWMDFZ), which would leave Israel out of its purview and focus exclusively on Iran.

### **The Explanations Not Offered**

The Saudis do genuinely feel aggrieved on the above three counts. There are some more – probably more important - reasons for the action that they have not articulated.

To start with, the sense of victory on Thursday and a terse rejection on Friday are unlikely to have emanated from the same source – unless one assumes a total gap in communication between the Saudi mission in New York and the Saudi Foreign Ministry in Riyadh. So, is there a split within the House of Saud? Is it a deliberate move to marginalise the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Feisal who is the world’s longest-running foreign minister since 1975?

The rumour mills put it down to a deliberate humiliation of Prince Saud who is suffering from Parkinson's disease and promote Prince Abdul Aziz to take his place. Prince Abdul Aziz is King Abdullah's son and is currently the deputy foreign minister. It is interesting to note that the foreign ministry statement was anonymous, the signature or even the name of the foreign minister was missing from it. Some insiders blame King Abdullah's violent fits of uncontrolled anger for the Kingdom's erratic behaviour.

On Syria, the Saudi anger is directed much more at the United States than at the veto-wielding Russia and China. For the past two years, their advocacy on behalf of the Syrian rebels has been completely washed away with President Obama stepping back from a confrontation with Syria and relegating the issue to a backburner of long winding inspections for chemical weapons on the Syrian territory. The Saudis perceive Iran as an existential threat; and not only over nuclear issue. The US aggressive posture towards Iran has helped calm the Saudi nerves for over a couple of decades. That posture has not produced results on the ground. The last straw on the camel's back probably came in the path breaking telephone call between Obama and the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. The US has let the Saudis down on the two issues the Saudis consider critical. The diplomatic mess over whether King Abdullah had invited Rouhani to perform Hajj or whether that invitation was declined by Rouhani has added insult to the injury.

There is a diametrically opposite understanding of the US variable in the Saudi-Security Council flip flop, according to which the Saudis cleverly avoided the eventualities

when they would have had to vote with an extremely unpopular US domestically and in the region; or bear the brunt of US displeasure by voting against it. Unlike the General Assembly resolutions which are symbolic and the Saudis have not always followed the US lead, the Security Council resolutions have serious consequences. The arms twisting can be rigorous, at times.

Last year, the Saudis were compelled to include two women participants in their team to the Olympic Games. They could have been debarred otherwise. The situation of women in the country came under severe scrutiny and criticism at that time. The bitter memory of a similar case must also grate the Saudi psyche when Qatar's successful bid to host the World Cup had opened up a Pandora's Box of queries on charges of bribery to the condition of migrant labour to the weather in Qatar! The Saudis must surely fear that their presence in the high profile Security Council could provide one more occasion for a harsh spotlight on the country's record on gender equality, human rights, political prisoners, religious freedom and many more. In fact, many Non-Governmental Organizations world-wide have rejoiced over the Saudi exit and called upon it to refrain from contesting for a seat in the Human Rights Council as well in November.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Amnesty International released its report around that time severely castigating the Saudis over arbitrary arrests, detentions, unfair trials, torture and other ill-treatments of its citizens. The UN Watch, a Geneva-based human rights organization celebrated the Saudi exit from the UN Security Council and called on the country to pull out of the elections to the Human Rights Council, as well.

## **A Tentative Assessment**

It is not an earth-shaking event in itself. And yet, the world is still trying to come to terms with its implications. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said he had not received any official notification from the Saudi government regarding the matter. The US State Department spokeswoman said that the US does not expect to always agree with its allies, but that there are a range of issues on which they would continue to work together. The Russians said that they were surprised and baffled by the reasons that the Kingdom gave to explain its position. The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council supported the Saudi decision. The French went a step further to say that they shared the Saudi frustration at the paralysis of the Security

Council. The Arab envoys at the United Nations met and requested the Saudis to reconsider their decision and accept the seat.

The United Nations must move on, in any case. There already is precedence when the Soviets refused to take their seat in 1950s and the Security Council convened with fourteen members. The Soviet Union was a permanent member. The Saudi non-permanent membership may also remain vacant. Or the Security Council may decide to initiate the process of inviting fresh nominations to fill the vacancy. Or, the Saudis might reconsider their decision and take a seat at the august body, after all!

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# Palestinian Politics and the Arab Spring: Some Critical Issues

Prasad M V

## Introduction

Great churning has occurred, and major political changes have taken place, in the West Asia/North Africa (WANA) region in the wake of the popular uprising, generally known as Arab Spring.<sup>1</sup> Starting in Tunisia, this civilian non-violent uprising spread to Egypt, Libya and later to Syria and elsewhere in West Asia. The Arab Spring has deeply impacted the regional politics and the global perception of the region and its people. It has, in addition, impacted the power relations between the state and citizens and people's aspiration for better and effective participation in the governance of their state. It has unseated the tyrant rulers in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. This wave of mass protests, when it reached Libya, acquired a new dimension, with wider implications to reorder the region not only to meet the genuine aspirations of the native people but also the interests of Western countries, particularly the US.

There was considerable apprehension about the impact of the Arab Spring on the Palestine issue and the Arab-Israel peace process. Subsequent developments and outbreak of civilian conflicts against the Libyan and Syrian regimes have vindicated the argument that the Arab Spring has an external dimension to reorder

the region to safeguard US-Israeli interests. The people's genuine demand for change in domestic politics gave an unexpected opportunity for external intervention to redesign this vital region of the world to suit Western and Israeli interests.

The Arab Spring has also touched the Palestinian domestic politics in several ways. The massive protest held by the Palestinian people in March 2011 once again highlighted the Palestinian demand for political reunification of the divided Gaza Strip (ruled by a Fatah-led government) and West Bank ( Hamas-led government) and national reconciliation of the two Palestinian movements for the greater cause of Palestine. Two major events directly impacted the Palestine issue. First, Fatah and Hamas met in Cairo in May 2011 and decided to shed their differences to form a national unity government; but pressure by the US on Fatah ensured that this attempt failed. The Fatah-led PA leadership in collaboration with Hamas then launched an international campaign as "Palestinian Spring" or "Palestine 194" to achieve UN recognition for the Palestinian state. They succeeded partially, with the Palestinians getting the status of a "full member observer state" in the international body in the subsequent year notwithstanding US-Israel opposition. This has strengthened the

role of Hamas in Gaza. Many academics have been arguing that the Arab Spring has reduced Arab support to the Palestinian cause. The Palestinians argue otherwise. This paper seeks to find an objective perspective on the issues concerned.

## **Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring started with the self-immolation of a Tunisian greengrocer, Mohammed Bouazizi, on 17 December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid town to protest the failure of the state to meet the basic needs of the citizens, such as generating adequate employment opportunities. His act triggered a series of popular protests, particularly in the major cities and towns of Tunisia, which ultimately resulted in the ouster of the Ben Ali regime. France and Saudi Arabia offered to help Ben Ali to quell the uprising, but in vain. Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia a few weeks after the protests began.

Protests started in Egypt on 25 January 2011 at the Tahrir Square against the tyrant regime of Hosni Mubarak. Protests also started in Morocco, Lebanon, Oman, Yemen and Syria. The wildfire protests in Egypt forced Mubarak to abdicate power. Since the signing of the Camp David Accord in 1978, the Arab world had generally perceived the Egyptian regime as a traitor to the Palestinian cause. However, this perception shifted slightly with the Oslo Accord in 1993 and President Mubarak became a key figure and mediator between the PLO-US and PLO-Israel.

When the mass protests spread to Libya against the Gaddafi regime, Western interests started giving the protestors political, diplomatic and military support. The hope and enthusiasm

generated by the Arab Spring also came under critical scrutiny with the failure to establish an alternative and stable government in Egypt and the inability to thwart US-Israeli interests in the region, who made a deliberate attempt to isolate the Palestine issue and delink the problem from the core of the West Asian region, but failed. The Palestinian Spring has now strengthened the Palestinian demand for a state of their own. Hanan Ashrawi notes:

Palestine has never been absent from the contemporary discourse in the Arab Spring. It remains vocal and emotive, even though many people say that the regimes exploited the issue of Palestine for their own sake. Yet the people have a very emotive, visceral relationship to Palestine, much more so than people thought. And they held their regimes accountable for being unable to do anything about it (Palestine). (*Ashrawe* 2011)

Will the Arab Spring support the peace process or will it impact negatively on the Palestinian movement? The Israelis feared that the emergence of Islamic forces like the Brotherhood in Egypt would destabilize the region and it would also seriously threaten their national security (Elie Podeh and Nimrod Goren 2013). Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other right-wing leaders expressed serious concern about the implications of the Arab Spring to Israel's security and the ongoing peace talks with Palestinians. But some sections in Israel were of the view that this would open an opportunity to resume negotiations and to accept the new realities in the region. President Shimon Peres and the Jewish agency Natan Sharansky are in this group (*ibid.*).

## **Impact of the regional uprising on Palestinian politics**

In the course of the Arab Spring the Palestinians protested massively in West Bank and Gaza Strip against the deadlock in the peace process, the non-reconciliatory positions of Fatah and Hamas, and increasing unemployment and economic hardship. Demonstrations, which started in February 2011 in solidarity with the Egyptian uprising, demanded an immediate end to the political schism of Fatah and Hamas and a concerted effort in fighting the Zionist state.

The protestors also demanded governmental reforms, new elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, and participation of all political forces in the PLO. Both the governments (led by Fatah and Hamas) responded immediately by launching a dialogue between themselves. This was a rare opportunity for their national reconciliation.

Regional developments, which resulted in the weakening of political support by the beleaguered government in Syria to Hamas, and the end of the Mubarak regime in Egypt which supported Fatah, increased the momentum in this mood of national reconciliation. On 5 May 2011 (officially on 6 May) the two sides signed a compact in Cairo agreeing to political reforms and formation of a new government within a year with the inclusion of technocrats and professionals outside of the Palestinian factions.

The agreement also outlined reforms in the PLO. In order to implement these, the PA postponed the local elections to October 2011. The US and Israel reacted hostilely to this political unity, declaring that participation by Hamas in the government would overturn

all the previous commitments made by them to the Palestinians. With this external pressure, the reconciliation became unworkable. Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership decided to challenge the US-Israeli position by launching a diplomatic move for UN recognition of a state in Palestine.

### **‘Palestine 194’**

The focus of the Arab Spring is freedom, dignity, democracy and self-respect. All these are being denied to the Palestinians by the governments ruling the Palestinian territory, the occupier and its collaborator. When the region was undergoing significant changes in the realm of politics and value systems due to the Arab Spring, the Palestinian leaders made use of this opportunity to launch a bid, which they called “Palestinian Spring”, for UN recognition. They argued that this move was closely connected with the political transition of the region.

The PA already had a scheduled programme since 2009 to declare a state by September, 2011; the latest developments enhanced the momentum to seek UN recognition. This demand was supported by 139 countries. Palestinians argued that full membership in the international body would be a realisation of previous UN commitments to them, besides respecting international law to end the injustice inflicted upon them by the UN itself. President Mahmoud Abbas in his General Assembly address on 23 September 2011 said:

The time has come to end the suffering and the plight of millions of Palestine refugees in the homeland and the Diaspora, to end their displacement and to realize their rights, some of them forced to take refuge more than once

in different places of the world. At a time when the Arab peoples affirm their quest for democracy – the Arab Spring – the time is now for the Palestinian Spring, the time for independence.

President Abbas demanded of the world community to have a concern for the plight of Palestinians who were being denied all basic rights. He tried to point out the contrasting stands of the Western states on similar issues in the same region. “My people desire to exercise their right to enjoy a normal life like the rest of humanity”, he said. The Palestinians, however, failed to get Security Council support to their demand because of US opposition.

Charles O. Cecil, a former US diplomat, points out that the energies let loose by the Arab Spring would “continue to be devoted to their own domestic affairs rather than being diverted to condemning the United States. We (the US) are hypocrites when we claim to want justice for the Palestinians but we do nothing meaningful to help them achieve this” (*WAEA*, 29 September 2011). He said:

Netanyahu’s office has issued a statement, saying “peace will be achieved only through direct negotiations with Israel.” You know, and I know, that Mr. Netanyahu has no intention of concluding a just and fair peace with the Palestinian Authority. His only concern is to continue the inexorable construction of more settlements, creating more “facts on the ground” until the idea of an independent Palestinian state becomes a mere memory of a bygone era. When Israel declared its independence in 1948 it did not

do so after direct negotiations with Palestine. If Israel really wants to negotiate with the Palestinians, why would negotiating with an independent Palestinian government, on an equal footing, deter it from engaging in these negotiations? (ibid.)

In November 2012, the Palestinian leadership took a General Assembly route for their status at the UN as an “observer non-member state” after their success in achieving full membership in UNESCO. This was a real political victory for the Palestinians and the post-Arab Spring regional environment that lent support for international mobilization to this demand.

## Conclusion

The Arab Spring has drastically changed the political discourse in the region and about the Arab people’s ability to reclaim power for political change. The West misread the future, that the Palestine question would become marginalized in the context of the Arab Spring. The Fatah-Hamas reconciliation efforts demonstrated the two movements’ ability to make concessions in the interests of the Palestinian cause. The Palestinian bid for UN membership derived energy and enthusiasm from the Arab Spring. The Palestinians also succeeded in mobilizing international support to their genuine demand for a state in Palestine.

## Endnotes

1. Initially, the West cautiously endorsed the Arab Spring, but later expressed some apprehension over the entry of Islamic forces to fill the political vacuum. Israel called it Arab Winter or Arab Chill (see Elie Podeh and Nimrod Goren 2013: 7)

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# Arab Spring in the Gulf Region: Reaction from Within

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## What is Arab spring

The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across the WANA region in early 2011. But their purpose, relative success and outcome remain hotly disputed in Arab countries, among foreign observers, and between world powers looking to cash in on the changing map of the West Asia.

The term “Arab Spring” was popularized by the Western media in early 2011, when the successful uprising in Tunisia against former leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali emboldened similar anti-government protests in most Arab countries.

## Arab Spring in GCC Countries

For the Gulf countries, the ongoing Arab spring has meant a difficult period of adjustment. In recent times, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have grown increasingly assertive in the foreign policy arena, developing muscular responses to regional unrest.

Saudi Arabia sees the uprisings as an unprecedented threat to regional security. Working through the auspices of the Gulf

Cooperation Council, Riyadh has tried to devise a united Gulf response to a number of challenges.

First, the GCC put together a \$20 billion (Dh73.4billion) aid package for Oman and Bahrain. The GCC’s Peninsula Shield Force, with troops from Saudi Arabia and police from the United Arab Emirates, entered Bahrain to help quell the protests there.

## Arab spring in Oman

First protest in Oman started on 17 January 2011 with the following demands, salary increase, Lower Cost of living.

On 18th February 2011, a new name has been given “Green March” by the protesters inspired by the serious unrest in the Bahrain. Around 350 people were assembled with a demand to end the corruption and better distribution of oil revenues.

On March 1, 2011 around 400 people were gathered outside the Consultative Assembly with a demand of Political reform and end of corruption. Protesters also continued to demand the Consultative Assembly be turned into a “real parliament.” The protests were reported to be “peaceful, well-organised and very disciplined

## Sohar Uprising

On 26 February 2011, nearly 500 protesters gathered around a shopping mall in the industrial city of Sohar, 230 kilometres from the capital Muscat. The protesters stopped traffic and shoppers around the mall premises. The shops in the area including the mall remained closed on 27 February as well.

On 27 February, protesters returned in Sohar for a second day, hurling stones at security forces who had cordoned them off.[26] The Royal Oman Police eventually used tear gas and rubber bullets to contain and disperse the protesters. Two protesters were killed.

On 28 February, protesters looted and burned a hypermarket in Sohar. The demonstrators also blocked the entrance to Sohar port, where 160,000 barrels of oil products needs to exported.

A Facebook entitled “March 2, 2011 Uprising for Dignity and Freedom” called for further protests in all parts of Oman, beginning on 2 March, and it attracted more than 2,300 users. However, only 50 protester gathered at the Globe Roundabout in Sohar with a smaller crowd of 50.

On 30 March, The Director of Public Prosecutions issued a statement saying that complaints were filed by some citizens about acts of rioting, vandalism and breach of public order, destruction of public and private properties, obstructing business transactions and hindering easy movement of people on the streets. Based on these complaints, he gave orders to arrest and clear all the protesters from the Globe Roundabout. The Omani army then stormed the Globe Roundabout clearing blockades and arresting a number of the protesters.



On February 28 2011, protesters set ablaze to the Lulu hypermarket in Sohar as protests continued for a 3rd day

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## Reshuffle of the Ministry

On 26 February, the Sultan reshuffled the cabinet in response to recent protests. The 84-member Shura council is elected by voters across 61 districts, but works in a purely advisory capacity and has no legislative powers. The cabinet reshuffle

1. Mohammed bin Nasser al-Khasibi commerce and industry minister,
2. Hamoud bin Faisal al-Bousaidi as civil service minister
3. Madiha bint Ahmed bin Nasser as education minister.
4. Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah al-Harthy, the outgoing civil service minister, was appointed to head the environment ministry,
5. Maqboul bin Ali bin Sultan will be the new transport minister
6. Mohsen bin Mohammed al-Sheikh becomes tourism minister.

## **Students Benefit**

The Sultan also announced benefits for the students of Higher College of Technology. The students whose homes are 100 km away from the place of study, will be now given 90 Omani rial allowances while those living at a less than 100-km distance would get 25-rial allowance. The Royal decree issued stated the reason for rise in these stipends as “to achieve further development and provide a decent living.”

## **Bahrain Uprising**

The Bahraini uprising is started with aimed at achieving greater political freedom and equality for the majority Shia population and expanded to a call to end the monarchy of Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

While Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak was being toppled in February 2011, the Arab Spring struck in Bahrain as 100,000 protesters filed into Manama’s Pearl Roundabout for three days of protests calling for democracy reforms to the longstanding rule of the Al Khalifa monarchy. The government responded with crushing force, backed by Saudi tanks that rolled across a land bridge connecting the peninsula to the island nation. The crackdown was especially notorious for the international condemnation raised when security forces raided hospitals to arrest the doctors and medical staff who treated injured protesters. Since then, the Al Khalifa monarchy has deployed a mostly successful strategy of preventing major protests from unfolding in the capital city and implanted a harsh crackdown on activists and opposition parties.

## **The Sultan of Oman cancelled a visit to India due to the unrest in the Arab world**

Due to uprising, Oman’s ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said has postponed Indian Visit. Sultan Qaboos was to have meetings with PM Manmohan Singh and was also scheduled to vacation for a while in Jodhpur

## **Uprising in Kuwait**

A 10-year old Egyptian boy named Bassem was expelled from education in the country for asking in class, “Why didn’t you have a revolution in your country?” Accused of inciting a revolution, the expulsion sparked an outcry, resulting in his reinstatement later that month. Soon thereafter, reports surfaced of a crisis growing in the country as a rebellious parliament stepped up pressure on the ruling family over allegations of mismanagement of public funds, corruption and inefficiency.

Sabah Al-Sabah, the Emir of Kuwait, gave every Kuwaiti citizen 1,000 Dinars (3580 \$) and a free food grant for one year on 18 January 2011 officially to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Kuwait’s liberation from occupying Iraqi forces during the First Gulf War, as well as the 50th anniversary of the state’s independence. But the grant was not extended to the stateless Bedoun living in Kuwait. Dozens demonstrated in Kuwait City on 19 February against their supposed second-class status. Opposition leaders called for further protests in March to pressure Prime Minister Nasser Al-Sabah to resign.

Stateless people continued to protest into January 2012 despite a protest ban, turning out on 13 and 14 January in slums near Kuwait City to call for the right to citizenship. On both days,

violence broke out, with riot police clashing with stateless demonstrators and arresting several dozen on 13 January and firing tear gas to disperse rally-goers on 14 January.

Riot police on 2 October, 2012 used tear gas and smoke bombs to disperse hundreds of stateless demonstrators who were demanding citizenship. Witnesses and activists said at least three people, including a policeman, were slightly wounded and 10 stateless were arrested as security forces laid a siege on Taima suburb in Al Jahra which houses tens of thousands of stateless. The new protest comes a week after three international human rights groups sent an unprecedented letter to Emir Al-Sabah urging him to end alleged abuse against stateless people.

### **Demotic Reactions**

After the storming of the National Assembly, Emir Sabah Al-Sabah called an emergency Cabinet meeting on 17 November 2011 to discuss the event. The emir denounced the demonstration as “an unprecedented step on the path to anarchy and lawlessness” and blamed the clashes on “pre-planned sabotage” by “rioters”. The Kuwaiti opposition responded by intimating the royal family sought to make Kuwait into “a police state”. Opposition lawmakers vowed to intensify protests “regardless of the price”.

The prime minister and his cabinet submitted their resignation on 28 November, 2011 ahead of a mass rally calling for their departure from power. The emir accepted the resignation and is expected to name a new prime minister within days, though Nasser will serve until the formation of a new government. Up to 50 thousand people marched in Kuwait city hours after the resignations were announced.

### **Uprising in Saudi Arabia**

Uprising started in Saudi Arabia with a 65-year-old man's self-immolation in Samtah, Jizan on 21 January, 2011 followed by the Jeddah protest. In February and March a series of protest occurred in the eastern providence of Qatif, Hafuf.

Faisal Ahmed Abdul-Ahad was the man killed by the Saudi security forces on march 2,2011. A “**Day of Rage**” was planned for 11 March,2011. Social media Facebook gathered almost 26000 members to protest against the government. Several hundred people protested in Qatif, Hofuf and al-Amawiyah. Khaled al-Johani on that same day. A huge demonstration have been occurred in Riyadh too despite a massive police presence. Al Johani, the main organiser of this protest know online as “the only brave man in Saudi Arabia” (BBC Arabic News March 12,2011)

In April, several small protests over labour rights took place in front of government ministry buildings in Riyadh, Ta'if and Tabuk. Protests, made up mainly of Shia protestors, continued in late March and April in Qatif and smaller cities in the Eastern Province such as al-Awamiyah, and Hofuf.

### **Women Protest**

In May and June 2011, influenced by the Arab Spring, Manal al-Sharif and other women organised a women's right-to-drive campaign. Al-Sharif drove a car in May and was detained on 22 May and from 23-30 May. Other women also drove cars, including actress Wajnat Rahbini, who was arrested after driving in Jeddah on 4 June, 2011 and released a day later. From 17 June to late June, about seventy cases of women

driving were documented. In late September, Shaima Jastania was sentenced to 10 lashes for driving in Jeddah, shortly after King Abdullah announced women's participation in the 2015 municipal elections and eligibility as Consultative Assembly members. King Abdullah cancelled the sentence.

Manal al-Sharif and Samar Badawi, active in the women to drive movement, announced that they had filed lawsuits against Saudi authorities in the Grievances Board, a non-Sharia court, because of the rejection of their driving licence applications. As of the end of June 2012, 100 Saudi women had started driving regularly since the June 2011 campaign launch. Women university students protested in King Khalid University in Abha in March 2012. Other university protests followed in Taibah University in Medina and Tabuk University in March and April.

It has been reported that around seventy cases of women driving were documented in the consecutive month.

In late November, Nasser al-Mheishi, Ali al-Felfel, Munib al-Sayyed al-'Adnan and Ali Abdullah al-Qarairis were shot dead by security forces in the Qatif region in successive protests and funerals.

### **Reactions from within**

On 10 February 2013 a Reuters report claimed that 10 intellectuals, human rights activists and lawyers came together to create the Umma Islamic Party – considered to be the first political party in Saudi Arabia. With a demand to the end of absolute monarchy in the country. On 18 February however, all ten members of the party

were arrested and ordered to withdraw demands for political reform in exchange for their release.

On 23 February 2013, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, after returning to the country following three months spent abroad for health treatment, announced a series of benefits for citizens amounting to \$10.7 billion. These include funding to offset high inflation and to aid young unemployed people and Saudi citizens studying abroad, as well the writing off some loans. As part of the Saudi scheme, state employees will see their incomes increase by 15 percent, and additional cash has also been made available for housing loans. No political reforms were announced as part of the package, though the monarch did pardon some prisoners indicted in financial crimes.

On 6 March 2013, the Saudi Arabian Council of Senior Scholars, headed by Grand Mufti Abd al-'Aziz al-Ashaikh, issued a fatwā (religious opinion) opposing petitions and demonstrations, declaring, "Therefore the council hereby reaffirms that only the reform and [counsel] that has its legitimacy is that which may bring welfare and avert the evil, whereas it is illegal to issue statements and take signatures for the purposes of intimidation and inciting the strife. ... reform should not be by demonstrations and other means and methods that give rise to unrest and divide the community. ... The Council affirms prohibition of the demonstrations in this country and [that] the legal method which realizes the welfare without causing destruction rests on the mutual advice. The fatwa included a "severe threat against internal dissent", stating, "[The Prophet] again said: 'He who wanted separate affairs of this nation who are unified,

you should kill him with sword whoever he is' (narrated by Muslim)." In late March, Abd al-'Aziz al-Ashaikh called for a million copies of the fatwa to be printed and distributed.

### **Why there were No Mass Demonstrations in Saudi Arabia**

The protests that did take place in the Kingdom were presented by the Saudi monarchy as small protests in predominantly Shi'a areas and this caused the bulk of the population to support the crackdown in cities such as Qatif, al-Awamiyah, and Hofuf. The Shi'a face significant economic discrimination by both the regime and the religious establishment because they're viewed as Iranian agents. The government collectively punishes the Shi'a community by marginalizing them in Saudi society. The monarchy is able to do this as it directly operates the radio and television companies in the Kingdom and the newspapers are subsidized and regulated by the government. Government censorship continues to plague the press, and legal access to the Internet must be via local servers, which the government controls. The key ministries are reserved for the royal family, as are the thirteen regional governorships. The monarchy controls every aspect of society making it difficult to remove the regime as it will require the elimination of the whole Al Saud clan.

Another factor that placated people was the role of the religious establishment. The monarchy has established numerous and complex patronage networks, which include the top religious scholars. The descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the 18th century founder of the Wahhabi school of

thought support the Al Saud family and thus legitimizes their rule. The most important religious posts are closely linked to the Al Saud family by a high degree of intermarriage. These scholars have promoted the royal family as defenders of Islam through their international efforts in constructing mosques. In situations in which the public deemed certain policies of the royal family questionable, the scholars would invoke fatwas to deflect any dissent. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia issued a fatwa opposing petitions and demonstrations in the middle of the Arab spring, his fatwa included a "*severe threat against internal dissent.*"

The Saudi monarchy was able to bribe most of its population with cash handouts and promises of reform. In order to contain the uprising, the monarchy announced a series of benefits for citizens amounting to \$10.7 billion. These included funding to offset high inflation and to aid young unemployed people and Saudi citizens studying abroad, as well as writing off some loans. As part of the Saudi scheme, state employees saw a pay increase of 15%, and cash was made available for housing loans. No political reforms were announced as part of the package.

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Manama's Pearl Roundabout before and after the revolution

for three days of protests calling for democracy reforms to the longstanding rule of the Al Khalifa monarchy. esponded with crushing force, backed by Saudi tanks that rolled across a land bridge connecting the peninsula to the island nation. The crackdown was especially notorious for the international condemnation raised when security forces raided hospitals to arrest the doctors and medical staff who treated injured protesters. Since then, the Al Khalifa monarchy has deployed a mostly successful strategy of preventing major protests from unfolding in the capital city and implanted a harsh crackdown on activists and opposition parties.

Across the country, security forces have continued to round up and arrest protest leaders,

opposition party officials and human rights activists and have cracked down on journalists who are critical of the monarchy. Attempts to evade international scrutiny have included denying visas for scores of foreign journalists, NGOs, European MPs and international human rights groups.

Initially, the protesters had demanded freedom, democracy and equality for Shias and Sunnis (a framework which could have preserved the monarchy on a new constitutional basis, with limited powers). But the ruling Al Khalifa monarchy remains deeply insecure over its minority status as a Sunni Muslim monarchy reigning over a large Shia Muslim majority. While the democracy movement was largely instigated

by Bahrain's Shia majority, which was tired of its second-class citizenship and being marginalized in the distribution of power and wealth, even many Bahraini Sunnis rallied to the protesters' campaign for greater accountability and justice.

Of Bahrain's population of 1.3 million, Shiites make up about 70 percent of the nearly 600,000 indigenous population, and today live alongside another 700,000 immigrants and foreign workers. Yet although they comprise a majority of the nationals, Shiites claim they face systematic discrimination, such as being barred from top government and political posts. By banning Shia from working in the national security sector and pressuring private companies to fire Shia employees and replace them with Sunni workers, critics charge, the regime is enforcing a Sunni "apartheid system" on the Shia majority. Bahrain's ruling monarchy fears that any gains by Bahrain's Shiites could open new footholds for influence by Iran, a predominantly Shiite country that is a main regional rival of the Sunni Arab-led nations just across the Gulf. Bahrain also accuses Iranian-backed Hezbollah of having a role in stirring the protests, though it has provided no evidence to support the claim.

### **Reaction from Within**

While Al Jazeera has called Bahrain's democracy movement "the Arab revolution that was abandoned by the Arabs, forsaken by the West, and forgotten by the world," activists are hoping they will not be forgotten. In January, a joint letter signed by over 30 human rights organizations worldwide, led by the Gulf Center for Human Rights and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was published. It calls on US

President Obama to intervene to release jailed Bahraini human rights defenders and activists and to immediately suspend US military support to Bahrain until the regime does so.

On April 23, two Bahraini human rights groups, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, publicly called on the world soccer governing body, FIFA, to withdraw Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al-Khalifa from the race to become the next president of the Asian Football Confederation because of human rights abuses. The open letter was followed by a similar one from Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain. Appealing directly to US citizens, Farida Ghulam, head of the Women's Issues Bureau for the opposition Wa'ad party, said: "I would love to see greater numbers of Americans side with the Bahraini people in fulfilling their dreams towards democracy and social justice.

Similarly, Said Yousif, vice president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, said: "We as Bahraini people deserve democracy. We need the US to push the regime for democratic changes. You get to change your leadership every four years with elections, but we've had the same prime minister for 42 years."

### **Conclusion**

The growing trend in the region is people demanding more rights and freedom than what their existing political system is willing to give them. Because of this, there is a great possibility that the GCC will eventually reach a point where they have to transform themselves into a constitutional monarchy system like in

the UK, Spain, Japan and Thailand, where the monarch operates within the framework of the constitution, in order to survive politically and continue in power. Kuwait and Bahrain have already made steps towards becoming constitutional monarchies by having elected parliaments but the ruler still has the power to appoint the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, which usually has more power in making legislation.

# The Arab Spring and its Impact on Women

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## Introduction

Women played vital roles in the Arab Spring, its impacts on Arab women and their rights are clear. The Arab Spring was a series of demonstrations, protests, and civil wars against authoritarian regimes that started in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. In these countries, they have been on the front lines of revolution. These nations will not succeed unless women are fully incorporated into political and economic life.

Women's involvement in the Arab Spring went beyond direct participation in the protests to include leading and organizing protesters and cyber activism. Women represent a significant proportion of the Arab world's population: 60% of the population is under the age of 30, and over half of them are female.<sup>1</sup> The Arab Spring countries have a poor record on most gender issues, but have successfully reduced gender gaps in areas like education and healthcare.<sup>2</sup>

Women, alongside men, participated in the protest movements that shook the Arab world

in 2011, demanding freedom, equality, justice and democracy. Women, as well as men, paid and continue to pay a high price for their struggles. Today women must be able to play their full part in building the futures of their countries. Women's participation in public and political life, on an equal basis with men, is an essential condition for democracy and social justice, values at the heart of the Arab spring.

Demands for equality are set aside while the efforts of protesters focus on bringing down regimes and dismantling oppressive state institutions.

Recent history painfully reminds us that the massive occupation of public space by women during revolutions in no way guarantees their role in the political bodies of the regimes that follow. Although the situation of women varies across the region, threats to their human rights converge.

## The Arab Spring

High unemployment rates, educated young populations, urbanization, social changes in family life, roles of women and the youth in the public sphere, neoliberal policies of privatization and union-busting, corruption, rising food and energy prices, decades of frustration with dictatorships, social media tools etc.. there are

1 Morgan, Robin (Spring 2011). "Women of the Arab Spring". Ms. Magazine. Retrieved 18 March 2013.

2 Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa. Washington D.C.: The World Bank. 2013. p. 135.

and will be many explanations for the sudden Arab revivals at the end of 2010 that surprised many experts, as few expected the region to change so quickly. But the revolutions have been the result of years of demographic transitions since the 1970s, which “have given rise to the Arab society of today which is, for the most part, young educated and urban – and also tremendously politicized”<sup>23</sup>

Never before has the Middle East received as much media coverage as during the events that became known as the “Arab Spring”. A common negative view gave way for some more optimism to take over and the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Libya suddenly changed the stereotype of the oppressed, repressed, suppressed, passive, and patriarchal Middle East society<sup>4</sup>. Instead, the “new Arab” is courageous, strong, capable, progressive, and opposes the authoritarian regime. He is also educated, young, and female.

In contrast to the image of Middle Eastern women limited to the private sphere, women have turned out to be key players at the forefront of the Arab Spring protests. They do not “just” have a gender agenda but fight for national freedom next to men.

## Tunisia

On 17 December 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire triggering protests

throughout the country against corruption, unemployment and police repression. Within a month demonstrations led to President Ben Ali’s resignation after 23 years in power. The Tunisian revolution set off the Arab Spring with repercussions throughout the region.

The transitional period has seen victories for women: Women represent 27% of the Constituent Assembly elected in October 2011. As of March 2012, in the 41-member government, there were 3 women.

### Women’s participation in protests

Tunisian women participated massively in protests demanding democratic change. Bloggers, journalists, activists, trade unionists, students, and mothers mobilised and took to the streets to call for Ben Ali’s resignation, freedom and dignity.

Throughout the Tunisian revolution, women and men were equal. Women of all ages, from all backgrounds and all walks of life participated in strikes and demonstrations. During the uprising, women were subjected to specific forms of police violence, including sexual harassment and rape. According to the *Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates* (ATFD), on 11 and 12 January, girls in Kasserine and Thela were raped by members of Ben Ali’s special forces.

In Tunis, from 14 to 15 January, several women protesters were raped while held in detention in the Interior Ministry. After the fall of Ben Ali, women demonstrated to demand full participation in the process of political transition. On 29 January 2011, women protesters were assaulted by groups of men shouting abuse and calling for protesters “to return to their kitchens”<sup>5</sup>

3 Casa Árabe, “The power of IT as a new instrument for democracy in Arab countries,” *Europe’s World*, no. 18 (2011): 130.

4 Haizam Amirah Fernández, “Nota para el Observatorio: Crisis en el mundo árabe,” *Real Instituto Elcano*, no. 4, 17 February 2011.

5 Women and the Arab Spring: Taking their place,

Since independence aspirations from France started to grow in the 1940s, women have been leaders in protest movements and social change in Tunisia. 71 % of Tunisian women are literate, one fifth is employed, and they represent 43% of the almost half million members of the 18 existing local unions.<sup>6</sup>

The Tunisian revolution has been caused by educated youth eager for dignity and employment. Moreover, women refusing primitivism and passiveness have played an important role in the Tunisian freedom demonstrations, marching up the streets in Tunis, which is what launched the Arab Spring.<sup>7</sup> Women such as Hand Sabry, a prominent Tunisian movie star, used social media such as Face book to challenge former President Ben Ali.

## Egypt

In January 2011, inspired by the revolution in Tunisia, massive protests broke out in Egypt, calling for social and political reforms, including an end to President Mubarak's 30-year rule. Although women participated alongside men in the revolution leading to Mubarak's resignation, they were excluded from the political transition: there were no women in the constitutional reform committees and a quota for women's representation in parliament was abolished.

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Director of publication: Souhayr Belhassen FIDH  
- Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme. 17, passage de la Main-d'Or - 75011 Paris  
- France, CCP Paris : 76 76 Z.

- 6 Juan Cole and Shahin Cole, "An Arab Spring for Women," *The Nation*, 26 April 2011.
- 7 Radhi Meddeb, "Europa ante un Túnez anclado al mundo libre," *Política Exterior*, vol. XXV, no. 140 (2011): 33.

Following the 2011 elections the proportion of women in the lower house diminished from 12% to 2%.<sup>8</sup>

Similar to Tunisia, close to one fifth of Egyptian women work. Employment has turned out to be a powerful tool and since 2004, some 3000 strikes have taken place, sometimes led by women.<sup>9</sup>

In Egypt, the revolution is believed to have been encouraged by Aasma Mahfouz's video posted on Facebook. In this video, she called on young people to massively demonstrate against President Mubarak in Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011. Social media have proved to be a very powerful tool in the uprisings. Also Leil-Zahra Mortada posted a photo album on Facebook where women's participation is shown.

Today, laws discriminating against women are associated with Mubarak's dictatorship and therefore their abolishment is being considered. Moreover, for the first time in the history of Egypt, a woman, Buthaina Kamel, is running for president in the upcoming elections next October 2011, something unthinkable in the Mubarak era.

## Libya

In February 2011, protests broke out across the country, calling for an end to Muammar Al Qaddafi's 42 year rule. Women participated

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- 8 *Women and the Arab Spring: Taking their place*, Director of publication: Souhayr Belhassen FIDH  
- Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme. 17, passage de la Main-d'Or - 75011 Paris  
- France, CCP Paris : 76 76 Z.

- 9 Megan Cornish, "Women Workers in Egypt: Hidden Key to the Revolution," *Al-Jazeera: Cross-Cultural Understanding*, 11 April 2011.

massively in the conflict that ensued, leading to the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. The transitional authorities (National Transitional Council) have thus far failed to take measures to ensure the representation of women in political bodies: the draft constitutional charter adopted in August 2011 contains no provision prohibiting discrimination against women; the 28-member cabinet appointed by the NTC in November 2011 includes only 2 women; and the electoral law adopted in January 2012 does not contain a quota or other measures to ensure the representation of women in the new parliament.<sup>10</sup>

In Libya, women are generally rather well represented in the public sphere as lawyers, teachers, doctors, etc. although they suffer from salary discrimination and hold few influential positions.<sup>11</sup> Libya is considered very conservative, especially when it comes to relationships between boys and girls. More specifically, it has a reputation as a stronghold of Muslim fundamentalism.

However, women have been active in the Libyan revolution since the first day. They have been important in wresting control of entire cities from Muammar Gaddafi. They have been writing blogs and creating associations. At the beginning of the Libyan revolution, men and women were equal until it was decided that women should have their own space to demonstrate, first

demarcated with stones, later with metal fences, to become a wooden wall by the end.

According to the 23 year-old Nada Gathrouni, the events that have been taking place since 15 February, 2011 are tremendous for Libyan women, “we don’t know yet what the new Libya is going to mean for us,” she says. “But one is certain: we won’t let us put aside so easily anymore.”<sup>12</sup> Regarding the post-Gaddafi political agenda, the National Transitional Council has 5 out of 70 government seats for women. While it is premature to draw conclusions, women have been key players in the Arab uprisings, but it remains a big challenge for them to change their position in the resulting new systems. This starts with education, both for men and for women. As we have seen after the Iranian Revolution, Algeria, and Kuwait, the patriarchal system and judicial system in particular may remain unchanged.

## Yemen

Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, in Yemen only 25% of the women are literate, approximately 15% have finished school and only 5% work. Still, especially in urban areas, women do have important job positions and more than 25% are enrolled in Universities. Women have been participating in protests as column writers against President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In April, after Saleh expressed his discontent with the mixing of women and men in public, women have been coming out on the street in great numbers throughout the country to demonstrate against him.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Women and the Arab Spring: Taking their place, Director of publication: Souhayr Belhassen FIDH - Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’Homme. 17, passage de la Main-d’Or - 75011 Paris - France; CCP Paris : 76 76 Z.

11 Gert van Langendonck, “Female protesters: demonstrating separately but much is changing,” NRC, Handelsblad, 24 June 2011.

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12 Ibid

13 Juan Cole and Shahin Cole, “An Arab Spring for Women,” The Nation, 26 April 2011.

Protests broke out at the start of 2011 following the ruling party's proposals to amend the constitution. The country's sluggish economy, high unemployment rate and widespread corruption fuelled further demonstrations, which met with violent repression. In the protests that followed, women were present in huge numbers, including as leaders. Discriminatory laws and customs are major obstacles to the participation of women in political life and there are no measures to ensure the representation of women in political bodies. There is one woman in the 301-seat parliament.

The 35-member National Unity Government established in December 2011, following President Saleh's departure, includes 3 women.<sup>14</sup>

### **Syria**

In Syria, women blocked roads to demonstrate for the release of their husbands and sons from prison. "Syrian women have staged all female marches to demand democracy and changes in regime policy".<sup>15</sup>

Demonstrations began in early 2011 demanding democratic reforms, including the withdrawal of the 48-year state of emergency, the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad and an end to Ba'ath Party rule. Protests were repressed by military and security forces with increasing violence. Civilians, women and men, were killed,

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14 Women and the Arab Spring: Taking their place, Director of publication: Souhayr Belhassen FIDH - Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme. 17, passage de la Main-d'Or - 75011 Paris - France; CCP Paris : 76 76 Z.

15 Juan Cole and Shahin Cole, "An Arab Spring for Women," *The Nation*, 26 April 2011.

arbitrarily arrested, detained and tortured by the military and security forces.

For the past 5 decades, the political participation of all citizens has been impeded by the repressive general climate. Discriminatory laws and practices present further obstacles to the participation of women. There are no measures to ensure the representation of women in parliament. There are 3 women in the 33-member government.<sup>16</sup>

### **Bahrain**

Also in Bahrain female protagonists such as Munira Fakhro have played influential roles in the Pearl Square demonstrations demanding change. Furthermore, Zainab al-Khawaja became known as a leading figure by going on a hunger strike. As Bahraini human rights activist Maryam al-Khawaja pointed out: "Women have always had a presence (in public demonstrations in Bahrain) but this time it was very strong".<sup>17</sup>

### **Cyber activism and social media**

New technologies, particularly social media, enabled women to participate in the Arab Spring as organizers, journalists, and activists. Protesters used Facebook to mobilize supporters and organize events and YouTube videos and Flickr photos gave the rest of the world visuals of the events of the Spring. Twitter functioned as a live

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16 Women and the Arab Spring: Taking their place, Director of publication: Souhayr Belhassen FIDH - Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme. 17, passage de la Main-d'Or - 75011 Paris - France; CCP Paris : 76 76 Z.

17 Xan Rice, et al., eds., "Women have emerged as key players in the Arab Spring," *Guardian*, 22 April 2011.

newsfeed for other domestic and international activists as well as international media organizations. Mobile phones, especially those with cameras and Internet access, served as a key tool for cyberactivists. Blogs were another vital method for women to disseminate information. The numbers of female and male bloggers from Arab Spring countries were relatively even.<sup>18</sup>

Younger women, generally the most excluded from traditional news outlets, thus benefited the most from the rise of social media. The new platforms also enabled protesters, both male and female, to get their messages out without the filter of state-run media. Social media helped women engage more people in the revolutions by reducing distinctions between social and political networks.<sup>19</sup>

Bahraini activists Maryam Al-Khawaja and Zainab Al-Khawaja, Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy, and Libyan activist Danya Bashir were called the “Twitterati” (a portmanteau of *Twitter* and *litterati*)<sup>20</sup> because their Twitter accounts of the revolutions were praised by international media outlets.

### **Impact of the Arab Spring on Women’s Rights**

It would be impossible to provide a full analysis of the Arab Spring’s effect on the lives of women and its female actors, primarily because in many instances the Arab Spring continues in varied

forms as the countries continue constantly to adjust to new rules of law and governance. Yet, what cannot be denied is the role that women played in the Arab Spring and the potential that this has given women to determine their own futures in their newly liberated countries. The Arab Spring gave women a platform for their voices to be heard.

In some instances, this was a success: the role of women in Tunisia and specifically the Al-Nahda party highlighted the importance of women’s rights. It showcased how a new political identity could be formed with the inclusion of women and, more importantly, it highlighted the necessity to include women in these forums. Not only had the women been participants in the Spring - but they too would be participants in the future. Of course, there are innumerable challenges that occurred - both during the Spring and since. Whilst it would be difficult to list them all, they cannot be ignored. There are challenges of representation in Egypt, in a number of countries it is the legislation and perhaps across the board it is the challenge of old, patriarchal dominancy which still poses a challenge to the women.

It should also be noted that ‘women’ in this context do not represent a homogenous group. They have varied, sometimes contrasting, goals and ambitions, but despite this, they are all hoping that they have the opportunity to voice their numerous concerns and demands. It would be reckless to conclude that the Arab Spring had brought about complete equality for women, but it is noteworthy that women were given such attention. For the first time in recent Middle Eastern history, women played a crucial role in

18 Radsch, Courtney (17 May 2012). “Unveiling the Revolutionaries: Cyberactivism and the Role of Women in the Arab Uprisings”. James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy. Retrieved 18 March 2013.

19 *ibid*

20 Definition of Twitterati in Oxford Dictionaries (US English) (US)

defining their countries' futures.

So, what did the Arab Spring do for women? It amplified their voices across the Middle East, their demands for a better future for themselves, their families and their countries and their demand to end to injustice, brutality and corruption. Of course, there is much more that all these different women want to achieve, but the Arab Spring has provided the first leap towards their myriad of goals.<sup>21</sup>

The executive Director of the Doha International Institute for Family Studies & Development (DIIFSD), Noor Al-Malki Al-Jehani said Arab Spring's effect on women is a complex. The revolution changed the face of Arab world bringing opportunities of gender equality, while women are increasingly confronted and suffering discrimination and violence.

Data shows that the revolution for real gender equality is still unfinished. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index illustrates that many of the Arab countries rank last among 135 countries worldwide: Turkey (124), Egypt (126), Syria (132) and Yemen (135) all showed large gaps in economic participation, education attainment, health and political empowerment.

There are lots of discussions about cultural discrimination and violence, poverty is actually the primary factor that mobilized millions of women to join the revolution. Arab women want to live in a society where they can be agents of their own destiny, not based on corporate

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21 The Arab Spring: What did it do for women? By Shazia Arshad Monday, 25 March 2013 17:37- Published in *Arches Quarterly*, Volume 6, Edition 10. See more at: <http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/5584-the-arab-spring-what-did-it-do-for-women>.

domination or foreign aid.

Dr. Sophie Richter-Devroe of Exeter University says it's still hard to say whether the Arab spring will put an end to violence against women. She explained that violence against women is not a random act but a war tactic used to intimidate and control civilians.

Dr. Rabab El-Mahid of the American University in Cairo, thinks that different forms of sexual violence existed long before the Arab spring. Even though the revolution opened doors for more violence, it also opened more doors for resistance. "The biggest women's march, we saw in Cairo, over the past thirty years, happened less than a week after that incident. We saw more than 200,000 women marching down the streets of Cairo, protesting against violence".<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Women played a crucial role in the long years of resistance to dictatorships. The movements of the Arab Spring have given them unprecedented visibility; women are now confronting attempts to exclude them from decision-making processes and the public sphere through discrimination and violence.

Women helped spark the Arab Spring protests in several countries and actively participated in all of them. Thousands of women of all ages, classes, and religions participated in the protests in every country.<sup>23</sup> When the

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22 Impact of the Arab Spring on Women's Rights. Inter Press Service News Agency, UNITED NATIONS, Mar 11 2013.

23 Shihada, Isam (Dec 2011). "Women and the Arab Spring: Expectations and Concerns". *Nebula* 8 (1): 283–295. Retrieved 18 March 2013.

police became unable to provide neighborhood security, women organized their own street patrols and guarded each other's tents.

Here I quote Charles Dickens' memorable lines describing the atmosphere of the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities*:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

# Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring and Beyond

Dr. Sudeep K S

## Abstract

*Internet became a major medium for news with the twin tower disaster of 9/11. The arrival of internet changed the arena of media studies itself in a big way. The production and distribution of the content getting distributed and the wide possibilities for direct interventions by the consumers thinned the lines between the producer and consumer and made the studies difficult. The struggles in the Arab countries generally termed as Arab Spring brought social media into the limelight. There were two lines of arguments about the role played by internet media like facebook in those struggles – one that it was facebook and twitter that made those struggles possible, and another one that said the role played by the social media was vastly exaggerated. However, the studies confirmed the prominent role played by social media in the organization, quick dissemination of information and in moulding public opinion in these struggles.*

*However there are limitations to facebook / twitter activism as well, as was evident from the way different nations including Egypt and China reacted to struggles or potential struggles. In India also the government has been trying to take control over the content shared on sites like Facebook, Google or Yahoo. But despite the limitations, one cannot overlook the importance of social media as a platform for protests and movements in the days to come.]*

## Introduction

The media historically has been owned and controlled by a few powerful people who own some of the big media houses, and this has been the case all over the world. Even as the capitalism boasted of the choice of the viewer, the options were very limited. Over the years the

internet has grown as a technology that breaks the monopoly on media and as a new medium for sharing information in a relatively more democratic manner.

The term social media needs to be defined before we discuss more about it. It is a term widely used to refer to various popular platforms used

for communication by millions of people all over the world, and includes mainly the networking site Facebook, video sharing platform YouTube, blogging tools like WordPress and Blogger and the microblogging platform Twitter. In the technical domain these are also referred to as Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is the term given to describe a second generation of the world wide web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online.<sup>1</sup>

The 'new media' or 'social media' started getting discussed widely in the international arena over the last three years, mainly because of the apparent role that it played in the people's struggles and movements that emerged around the middle of the year 2010 in the African Arab countries Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria and later in various movements all around the world including the United States of America. These movements stood out from all the revolutions and struggles that had happened before them, because of their creative use of the social media.

## **Studies**

There have been doubts expressed about the real role that the internet media like Facebook played in those struggles – was it only a medium that conducted information and helped coordination between the different groups and people or was it rather the very inspiration and driving force behind the events that took place in the Middle East and North Africa around that time. 'The role of social media in the Arab spring', a study carried out by Adrian Nikolov of University of Warsaw, summarizes some of these studies and attempts to determine the real role that the social media played in the revolution. Siting

various studies, the paper concludes that these revolutions have a feature that distinguishes them from everything that happened in the past, and it is the fact that they used new methods of organization, discussion and quick dissemination of ideas.<sup>2</sup>

An Arab Social Media Report titled 'Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter' published by Dubai School Government in May 2011<sup>3</sup> and an article 'Streetbook: How Egyptian and Tunisian youth hacked the Arab Spring' published in Technology Review, September-October 2011<sup>4</sup> were also among the early comprehensive studies on this subject. Among these, the first one tries to answer questions like what are the penetration trends of social networking services in the Arab region, what is the growth rate, and what is the demographic and gender breakdown, and what factors affect the adoption of these platforms in different Arab countries. The latter mainly does a case study of Egypt and Tunisia and traces the origins and evolution of the internet activism in those countries.

The above mentioned studies have been earlier referred to in a Malayalam article by Author.<sup>5</sup>

## **Some Key Observations**

The Arab Social Media Report takes note of the fact that the number of Facebook users has risen significantly in most Arab countries, most notably so in the countries where protests have taken place. Also, it can be stated that many of the calls to protest in the Arab region were initially made on Facebook, with an exception of the first protest in Tunisia. Thus, even as

the Facebook pages cannot be counted as the defining or only factor in people organizing themselves, they played a key role as the initial platform for the protest calls.

Regarding the numbers, about 14.8 million people used Facebook in the Arab countries in 2010, and this number grew to 28 million by early 2011. Countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain showed significant rise in the number of Facebook users where the numbers went down in Libya. The diminishing numbers in Libya could be because many residents fled the country during that time.

The attempts to ban Facebook and Twitter by the governments and the subsequent Facebook/Twitter 'black-outs' backfired in most of the countries. When the black-out started affecting the organization of the struggles, it provoked the protestors and they involved more and more people in order to resist such attempts. They looked for other creative ways for communication and organization.<sup>6</sup>

Nikolov's paper summarizes what the social media did during the Arab revolutions into the following three main functions: One, it was the place where the ideas were discussed and information was spread in the first phase; two, as an organizational tool -- it was where the uprisings were planned; and finally, it worked as a means by which information could be 'leaked' into the conventional media and got world publicity.

Through social networking sites, a single message – regardless if it is a manifesto, the plan for a gathering or a video showing cruelty of the army – could reach thousands of people within minutes. Anyone could share their

opinion on these, give a suggestion or share an idea, everybody thus becoming an activist and an organizer.

Another edge that the social media had over conventional media was that since the servers used by bloggers and internet activists are generally located in the West, individual eastern governments had no way to block them from expressing their opinions freely on the internet; and the only way to achieve that goal was to physically detain them and prevent them from accessing the web, and ultimately to put them in prison.

However, the paper concludes that it would be an exaggeration to call those uprisings (collectively) a social media revolution, because regardless of the amplifying effect that social media gave to everything that took place, the events were invariably based on real-world facts which reflected in the virtual space.<sup>7</sup>

Television also played an important role in these protests, and it was in a way complementary to the role of the social media. The images and videos initially shared over Facebook got a wider reach through television channels. Only about 20-25% had access to internet, but about 80% people had access to television. The rulers strongly believed that Al-Jazeera was the biggest trouble-maker and the channel was spewing restlessness in their countries. Some countries even tried to ban Al-Jazeera but that only tarnished their image further.

### **A brief history - Tunisia**

The 'social media revolution' did not happen overnight in the African Arab nations. The article by John Pollock delves into the evolution

of internet activism in Tunisia and Egypt and the various ways in which internet contributed to the struggles in those countries at various points of time.

Two Tunisians known by pseudonyms of “Foetus” and “Waterman” and their organization Takriz performed a remarkable and largely unknown role in the street revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt. Takriz began in 1998, as what they call a “cyber think tank”. Their initial aim was to ensure better freedom of speech and affordable Internet access to people. Waterman recalls that the Internet was the only viable option for organizers in 1998, because other media were controlled by Ben Ali. Foetus was a skilled hacker who started hacking because he couldn’t afford Tunisia’s then-exorbitant phone and Internet costs. Another advantage that they saw online was safety. While “real life” meetings meant spying by Ben Ali’s police, Foetus says, “Online we could be anonymous.”

The next ten years saw a gradual increase in the number of people who used internet in Tunisia. By 2008 it was around 30,000. By October 2009 it reached 8,00,000 and by 2011 January when Ben Ali fled, it touched 1.97 million, about 20% of the Tunisian population.

In 2008, protests focusing on corruption and working conditions broke out in Tunisia’s mining region, near the town of Gafsa. It resulted in security forces opening fire, killing one and injuring 26. The unrest remained local, though, in large part because security forces cut the area off. Foetus says it was “hard to build on these events” because “the technology wasn’t in place”: few Tunisians had camera phones or Facebook accounts at that time.

Meanwhile Ben Ali’s online censorship grew more and more draconian. Dailymotion and YouTube were blocked in 2007. A technique called deep packet inspection was used to stop e-mail deliveries, strip read messages from inboxes, and prevent attachments to Yahoo mail. Reports about Gafsa on Facebook, which then included just 28,000 of some two million Tunisians online, led the regime to block Facebook itself for two weeks.

On December 17 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a poor vegetable seller, set himself on fire in protest of a series of humiliations suffered at the hands of officials. Peaceful protests that broke out in response met with heavy-handed reaction, and several people were killed. The conventional media mostly kept quiet about it.

One video became influential in spreading the unrest. It showed a hospital in the small town of Kasserine in chaos, desperate attempts to treat the injured, and a horrifying image of a dead young man with his brains spilling out.

Posted and reposted hundreds of times on YouTube, Facebook and elsewhere, it set off a wave of revulsion across North Africa and the Middle East. Tunisians with internet access were “online almost 24 hours a day”. People shared the video and said, ‘You don’t want to see this, it’s horrible, but you must. You have a moral obligation to look at what is happening in your country.’

In a paper published in the *North Africa Journal*, Tunisian virtual-reality scientist Samir Garbaya of the Paris Institute of Technology looked at Facebook posts during the revolution. He wrote a script, using semantic search techniques based on keywords related to ongoing protests, to measure how much time it took for posts to

result in responses like comments. In November, the average was four days. The day after Bouazizi burned himself, eight hours. On January 1, two hours. As Ben Ali left, just three minutes.<sup>8</sup>

## **Egypt**

Egypt, too, saw industrial protests in 2008, here it was in the city of Mahalla in the Nile Delta. Textile workers there planned a strike on April 6. There were further demonstrations in Cairo and a national shopping boycott. They did not think about Facebook in the beginning because for them it was very new. Instead the Egyptian organizers relied on leaflets, blogs, and Internet forums. When they did set up a Facebook page, they were amazed to see 3,000 new fans a day.

Like in Tunisia, it was the state excesses that led to the final battle on the streets in Egypt as well. On June 6, 2010, a young computer programmer named Khaled Said was at a cybercafé in Alexandria when he was dragged out by two plainclothes policemen and beaten to death in the street. The police claimed he was resisting arrest, while his family says that he had compromising videos showing the police dealing drugs, and that the authorities feared he would use a tactic that had become popular in Egypt: uploads on YouTube and Facebook.

Said became a revolutionary icon when the post-mortem photos, taken on his brother Ahmed's cell phone, were posted to Facebook. 'We Are All Khaled Said' emerged as an enormously influential Facebook group; and it had about 1.5 million members by August 2011. A local activist first saw the photos on his cell phone and immediately used his own Facebook page to call for a protest outside the police station.

The protests started in Egypt much before Tunisia, but the developments in Tunisia helped the movement gain momentum. A text message that made rounds said: "Ben Ali gone. Possibility." Recipients understood the possibility.<sup>9</sup>

## **More on the social media effect**

Mostafa. An activist from Egypt, says: "Before this social-media revolution, everyone was very individual, very single, very isolated and oppressed in islands," "But social media has created bridges, has created channels between individuals, between activists, between even ordinary men, to speak out, to know that there are other men who think like me. We can work together, we can make something together."

However, it is important to note that the major action happened on the streets. The article quotes, "On Facebook and Twitter and social media we just speak [about] what happens. If nothing happens, Facebook and media have no utility."<sup>10</sup>

## **Resonances in China and the US of A**

When the Tunisian revolution became popular by the name 'Jasmine revolution', China took precautionary measures to prevent a similar revolution in their country. They removed every mention of jasmine on internet. The Chinese letters used to write 'Jasmine' disappeared from the internet. The government even removed online video footages of the then Chinese President Hu Jintao singing the popular Chinese song 'Jasmine Flower'. Fearful of the flower's destabilizing potency, they even canceled China International Jasmine Cultural Festival scheduled for summer 2011.<sup>11,12</sup>

The Occupy Wallstreet movement borrowed the organizational style from the Arab revolutions. It was a facebook call by Adbusters Media Foundation that gave rise to the movement. They invited activists, students and others to occupy the Wallstreet of New York on September 17, 2011. The call came about four months in advance.<sup>13</sup>

### **In India**

Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement that started in 2011 March gained huge popularity through social media.<sup>14,15</sup> This movement the middle class of India a feeling that they were also doing something for the nation. The mainstream newspapers and television channels celebrated this rebirth of 'Satyagraha'. As the author wrote earlier in a blog post, it was an easy "solidarity" and a comfortable "revolution" of the middle class. They continued to remain corrupt, the caste-class nexus continued, the Lalus and Rajas will got tried and punished for corruption, the Chidambaram kind or Kapil Sibal or Manmohan or Ambani kind of corruptions were hardly understood as corruption.<sup>16</sup> Manu Joseph wrote about this selective rage over corruption in The New York Times.<sup>17</sup> There was opposition among people to the 'new Gandhi' and his revolution, and it came mainly from the dalit movements of India. They also used facebook widely to strengthen their voices and they took out a rally in New Delhi.<sup>18</sup> However, the under-coverage of these voices in the mainstream media points to a major limitation of the social media as a tool for social change.

Similar case was the rape and murder of a woman in December 2012 in New delhi. The

protests against the rape became a national rage with the support of the social media and the mainstream media alike. However, several other heinous acts of rapes and murders continue to remain in the dark.<sup>19</sup>

### **In Kerala**

In the beginning of 2011 there were three articles that appeared in Malayalam periodicals about the use of social media. N M Siddique and N S Madhavan. It cannot be a mere coincidence that they came around the time when 'Arab Spring' was at its peak, though none of them was particularly about the movements in the Arab nations.

In his article that appeared in Madhyamam daily, Moidu Vanimel wrote that "definitely, the new developments in the cyber world is a threat to the big guns and those who keep secrets, though such meaningful interventions are relatively less in Malayalam. When the Karnataka police charged a case against Tehelka orrespondent K K Shahina (for a report published on her spy camera interviews with witnesses in the Maudany case), there was a major campaign and discussions against the police action in the cyber world. The mainstream print and visual media mostly evaded it initially but the cyber discussions made a significant intervention."<sup>20</sup>

In an article published in Thejas fortnightly, N M Siddique shares his concerns about the younger generation 'losing their way' cyber superhighway. He feels that simplification of things, soft sexual undertones, 'small talks' and peeping into others' privacy characterize the discussions on social media like orkut and facebook, and the online groups and friend circles – that go to the extent

of cyber sex – can not be made a platform for meaningful and serious discussions.<sup>21</sup> Such judgements evolve from pre-conceived and rigid notions of what all can qualify as 'meaningful' or 'serious' discussion. If the communications that evolve through 'small-talk' and sexual attraction are labeled silly, I think it only limits and weakens the scope and effectiveness of the human rights movements which Sri Siddique is also a part of.<sup>22</sup>

“Over 50% of the web world is under the control of Hidutva extremists”, opines veteran writer N S Madhavan in his interview in Mathrubhumi Weekly. “They are spreading wrong notions of morality. Cyber warriors (of Hindutva) who reside in the USA or elsewhere and Zionists have hijacked the cyber world. The web world is turning out to be a propaganda platform for them. The left parties are averse to using this space effectively. There is absolutely no control on the usage of web technology (in India), and it has created a serious situation.”<sup>23</sup>

It may be true that more than half the web world is under the control of the Hidutva 'warriors', but it is not particularly alarming if we try to take stock of who controls the mainstream media in contrast. Arundhati Roy talks about the power centers in our national media, in an interview on Malayalam news channel Indiavision: “It is not even a class – it is a handful of people who make 90% of the opinions, and they consider themselves the voice of the nation.”<sup>24</sup>

Sri Madhavan's claim about having the web technology having a “free run” also needs to be contested. There are cyber laws in place and there have been several instances over last 2-3 years where these laws have been used and abused.

Jokes about CPI(M) leader Pinarayi Vijayan that made rounds over e-mail, comments about Bal Thackeray on facebook and cartoons shared about our prime minister have come under the knife of the law among others.<sup>25,26,27</sup>

It can be noted that at least on a few instances, the social media has been used creatively against the propaganda played by the mainstream media and the state. There have been campaigns and/or interventions against denying medical care and bail to Maudany, in support of Chitralkha the autorickshaw driver, against denying censor certificate to the film Papilio Buddha, against illegal detainment of two girl children terming them Maoists and against the arrest and character assassination of Sri K M Subhash who was charged of murdering a research student of his institute that can be remembered in this context.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Anoop Kumar, of Insight Foundation, New Delhi wrote on facebook the day Hosni Mubarak was ousted from power: “Mubarak ho, got a realization today that it is very easy to fight against a dictatorial state in comparison to a dictatorial society. It just takes 30 years to defeat the first one:)” One cannot undermine the fact that internet gives space to say this openly in public.

It is important to make use of the 'new media' understanding its limitations. At the same time one should not live in the illusion that internet offers a space that is much more democratic than the 'real' world. The oppressions and inequalities of the outside world is present in the cyber space also, though in a different way. In the book *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, Evgeny Morozov questions the

reality of the 'twitter revolutions' that are hyped as a 'short-cut to democracy'. He argues that 'autocratic' nations like Russia, China and Iran keep internet under their observation and kill any possibility of internet activism against the state.<sup>28</sup> India had also asked facebook, Google and Yahoo to 'screen' the contents shared by the users before allowing it to go online.<sup>29</sup> Recent revelations by Edward Snowden showed that the apparently 'more democratic' nations are also not free from this fear, as they have also been spying on the web and taking precautionary measures against 'anti-national' activism.<sup>30</sup>

Even with all its limitations, the social media

is a reality and internet activism is here to stay. At the same time the mainstream newspapers and television channels remain extremely powerful even now, especially in places like Kerala where people are addicted to these sources of news. 'Yadhartha Pathrathinte Shakthi' (Strength of the real news paper), as the famous tagline of the Mathrubhumi newspaper goes.

(Presented at an International Seminar on Society, Culture and politics in West Asia: Post Arab Spring Dynamics, organized by the department of Arabic University of Kerala at Thiruvananthapuram on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> October 2013.)

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# 'Power as a Tool or is Aim?'

## A Post Arab Spring Reading of Islamic Politics

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### Abstract

*Tariq Ramadan's ideological stance to go beyond Islamism makes divergent reactions from Muslim intellectuals. Post Arab spring reading of Islamic politics leads to rethink about the role of Islamism and Islamic State, especially after the military coup on Egypt. What does for stand Islamic politics? What is the role of Islamic state? If the power is 'aim' of political Islam, People of Muslim World should not be disagreeing with it. If the power as 'tool' for being a highly valued society [Khair Ummah], we should go beyond so called Islamism. This subject analyzes the relevance of Islamic state and Islamic politics in the context of recent improvements of Arab Spring. The present study attempts to clear the 'nature' of Islamic state and politics by providing historical and textual evidences.*

### Political definition of Power

Power and its relation to society have been discussed in several academic spaces. It is the ability to influence the behavior of people, a group or a society. Power can be used for various functions. Its role differs according to the institution on which power has assigned. For instance, the role of power in family and marriage varied as like in Team work and drudgery. But power has common feature and roles in all institutions and environment. Power in state can be functioned in many ways. Society sees it either evil or great, but the exercise of power is accepted as disposition to human as social being. In the

corporate environment power is often expressed as upward or downward<sup>1</sup>. When elaborating the functions of power in a state, it can be addressed with many definitions like pluralist theory of power, elite theory and ruling class theory. In state, power can be accessed by a group who compete with each other and no one able to dominate because of checks and balances laid on a democratic system. In another definition, there are a series of competing elite to power and powerful groups who are able to impose their will upon the rest of society. The elite form of power can be through either circulating elites

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1 : Grenier and Schein 1988

or not<sup>2</sup>. There is Marxist form of theorizing it which argues that power is fundamentally lodged with the owners and controllers of economic production. Political power is seen to derive from economic ownership and, in this respect, we can identify a ruling class which not only control the mean of production, distribution and exchange in capitalist society, but which also dominates and controls the institution of political power<sup>3</sup>. Gramsci is known for his theory of cultural hegemony which describe how state use cultural institution to maintain power in capitalist societies. Lenin believed that culture was ancillary to political objectives but for Gramsci, it was fundamental to the attainment of power that cultural hegemony be achieved first. On this thought, power is attributed as aim through cultural hegemony. But on the same way, power can be used as tool to attain cultural hegemony. In other words, power and cultural hegemony are reciprocal.

The use of power need not involve coercion or force or threat. At one extreme it more closely resembles to influence although some make distinction between power and influence and they see influence by which power is used<sup>4</sup>. Power may be held through many forms like Knowledge, Force or violence, social class, moral persuasion or religion and delegated authority. We can say definitely that religion can act as mean for power. JK Galbraith sees the

2 : Mosca and Parto

3 : for further reading, functionalist theories of power by Parson, A Non-Marxist conflict theory of power by Weber and A Neo Marxist theory of Power by Gramsci.

4 : Herady. C. 1993 understand organization

conditional power as the result of persuasion<sup>5</sup>. Religion by which power held on society causes to influence the people so the influenced power remain and continue to the next institution which can be state. State without influenced power is transience. So we can assure the different functions of power and its flexibility as a institution which can be held in many roles. So the rational utilization of power will brighten and cause to stability.

### **Power in Islamic politics**

Firstly, we should aware the role of religion in Islamic political system. Obviously, Islam has unique political system but it is never so called Islamism. Islam has unique system in all regions of life and society. It laid on the valued culture and ethics. The integrity of Islam should be accepted. Post colonial study's tendency to deductive methodology causes to lack of real meaning of Islamism. This word reduced to the political ideology itself. It is not only political, but also social and cultural entity should be considered as part of Islamism.

What does for stand Islamic politics? What is the role of Islamic state? Islamic state is not theocratic. Contemporary scholar Yusuf Qardawi says: Islamic activists don't call for theocratic state, or they should not call for it. They address only Islamic state. There is great distinction between theocratic state and Islamic state. Religion is one of the essential parts of Islamic Sharia. Self, offspring, wealth and honor are other essential parts of Islamic sharia<sup>6</sup>.

5 :JK Galbraith, The anatomy of power

6 : P.58, Fiqh Addoula, Yusuf Qardawi, 1993

Islamic state stands for the preservation of these essential parts. So, definitely we can say the role of power in Islamic politics is as tool to preserve these elements which are basic requirement of human life.

Quran says: God orders you to delegate the responsibilities to those who are qualified. If you judge between people, then you shall judge with justice<sup>7</sup>. In another chapter it says: those whom if we allow them authority in the land, they establish regular prayer and give Zakath, enjoin the right and forbid wrong<sup>8</sup>.

From these verses we can understand the aim of Islamic politics is not merely power. Islam introduces unique justice, truth and harmony, for which stand Islamic state. Then power is tool to be a high valued society as Quran call Khair Ummah<sup>9</sup>. On prophetic history, Quraish promised him power, during the Makkah Period, to come back from the propagation of Islam, but he refused it because power is not the aim of Islam, it aims the formation of highly cultured society by which power can be achieved. On the prophetic word, the aim of his expedition is to accomplish high values. If we examine

the existing traditions and Vices of Jahliyya Period, we can easily find the presence of unjust, inequality and iniquity. The emergence of Islam caused to remove these vices and to establish justice as Quran demand the believers<sup>10</sup>. Quran definitely says that if they get power, they will establish regular prayer and Zakath. In other words, if they get power, they will establish justice and equality because power is mean and tool for them.

When we say about the nature of power as tool to make society cultured and valued, we should aware the concept of power. Power might not belong to politics i.e. State politics. Power can be used without the formation of state because power is the ability to influence others, it can be through many ways<sup>11</sup>.

### **Concept of power on post Arab spring Islamic Politics**

Arab spring was a tool for state power through which people of Middle East dreamt an equally justified state. All the revolutions occurred by conflicts between those who advocate for basic needs of human life

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7 : Chapter. 4, verse.58

8 : Chapter. 22, verse.41

9 : Chapter. 3, verse. 110

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10 : Chapter. 4, verse.58

11 : Such as religion, social class Etc. state formation and office bearers are one of the ways.

# Influence of the Arab Spring on the Arabic Poetry

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‘Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’, Percy Shelley wrote in 1821<sup>(1)</sup>. Though we agree or disagree with this view, the influencing characteristic of the poetry and poets on the society cannot be ignored. As the poetry is defined as the spontaneous overflow of the feelings, it can portray the emotions, sensations and feelings of the oppressed and suppressed people and thus stir their dissents and protests against the oppressing powers. In almost every massive revolution, we can find this integral relationship of the poetry to the ‘struggle between revolution and oppression’ which results in bringing many changes in the society and in the form, language and theme of the poetry as well.

The recent revolts in different Arab countries in the West Asia which were nicknamed as ‘Arab Spring’ by the west, have brought many changes in the politics, culture, social order and literature of the region. Many talks and symposiums are being held at the academic level, all over the world on the influence and the aftermath of the so called ‘Arab Spring’. As many dictators in those regions were toppled and the whole

social and political orders were reordered, it is impossible to remain the literature especially the poetry which is regarded as the tongue of the society, unchanged. In this paper I would like to discuss the role of Arabic poetry in the recent Arab revolts and to find out how far the Arabic poetry was influenced by these revolts.

## Revolts and poetry

The poetry is considered as a reflective mirror of a society which projects back how that society or its culture looks like. It portrays the grand assumptions and tacit norms of the culture and thus it can also play a role in shaking the props and rearranging the mental furniture in the culture by galvanizing people against the injustice and all deviances in the society. As the poetry has the power to express the emotional message that could not be articulated in any other forms of literature, we can find out a strong relationship between the revolutions and the poetry.

As we go through the history of revolts and revolution in the world, we can easily realize the role of the poetry, without the differences among the languages, in stimulating the emotions of the people against an existing political regime or a social order. As our discussion is on Arabic

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1. “Defence of Poetry” an essay written by Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1821.

poetry, we can take it as an example. From the early known history of the Arabic poetry, the poets had a highly reputed position among the Arabs for their power to influence the society. We can see the deep-rooted connection of the poetry with the heart and soul of the Arabs, during their conflicts and war affairs. The warring troops in the early history of Arabs were accompanied by a group of poets in order to stimulate and inspire their emotions against the enemies<sup>2</sup>. We can find a lot of collections of such poems in the classical Arabic literature.

The poetry is regarded as a transformative weapon of resistance, while at the same time becoming a coping mechanism to deal with the more harrowing and disturbing experiences of the revolution. We can find its presence in the great American and French Revolutions, as the poems of Willaim Blake, Philip Freneau, Phillis Wheatley and other great poets fuelled the people in those great events which changed the course of the world history itself. The uprisings broke out in the Arab world also had sufficient number of poets who utilized their words in resisting the oppressive regimes while at the same time expressing the peoples' latent desire for freedom and social justice. Poets like Abdullah Nadeem, Abu ssami Baroodi, Mahmood Darvish, Swalah Jaheen fought for the victory of the Arab revolutions like Urabi Revolution in 1881, the 1919 Revolutions, the 1952 Revolutions and etc.

The poetry is not simply an ornament to the uprising—it is its soundtrack and also composes a significant part of the action itself and so it

cannot be reduced to mere texts that can be read and translated in words. The couplet-slogans being sung and chanted by protesters do more than reiterate complaints and aspirations those have been communicated in other media. As the poetry has the power to convey messages from hearts to hearts, as well as to sharpen demands of the people with ever keener edges, it's an inevitable part of the revolutions.

### **Role of poetry in the Arab Spring**

The term "Arab Spring" was popularized by the Western media in early 2011, when the successful uprising in Tunisia against former leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali emboldened similar anti-government protests in most Arab countries. The term was a reference to the turmoil in Eastern Europe in 1989, when seemingly impregnable Communist regimes began falling down under pressure from mass popular protests in a domino effect<sup>3</sup>. As a result of these revolutions in the Middle East, some countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen entered an uncertain transition period; Syria and Libya were drawn into a civil conflict, while the wealthy monarchies in the Persian Gulf remained largely unshaken by the events.

These recent upheavals and revolutions in the Arab countries, named as 'Arab Spring' also witnessed the magical power of the poetry as well, as it played a big role to light up the discontent of the people against the dictatorial regime in their countries. The main role of poetry in the Arab spring was played by poems already written from pre-revolution years, not especially written for

٢. "من شعر الحرب في الجاهلية" مقالة للدكتور وليد قصاب، نشرت في موقع <http://www.alukah.net>

3. "Definition of the Arab Spring" an essay written by Primoz Manfred, <http://middleeast.about.com>

this particular uprising. Even though, when the poems composed during previous events in the Arab world inspired the people and made them aware of the need of a change, new generation of the poets also participated in this revolution with their vernacular and classical poems to provide strength for the people assembled against the existing powers. Those poems were embedded in politics and dedicated to reflecting a social situation and freedom of speech – from which the protestors took their strength.

The people participated in the uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt was inspired by lines from an early 20th century Tunisian poem by Abul-Qasim al Shabi named as “The Will of Life”. This poem starts with the lines:

إذا الشعب يوماً أراد الحياة      فلا بد أن يستجيب القدر  
ولا بدّ لليل أن ينجلي      ولا بدّ للقيد أن ينكسر  
ومن لم يعانقه شوق الحياة      تبخر في جوها واندرث<sup>(٤)</sup>

These lines can be translated as:

“If, one day, a people desire to live,  
then fate will answer their call.  
And their night will then begin to fade,  
and their chains break and fall.  
For he who is not embraced by a passion for  
life will dissipate into thin air”

The slogan which all the Arab uprisings that we are witnessing now used is derived from this poem of Al-Shabi. Likewise, the inspirational poems written by the Palestinian poet Mahmood Darwish, the Yamani poet Muhammed Mahmood Zubeiry, and the Syrian

poet Muhammed al Magooth on different events also motivated the people towards their goal.

It’s worth mentioning that the slogans that the protesters were chanting are poetic couplets—and they are as loud as they are sharp. The diwan of this revolt began to be written as soon as Ben Ali fled Tunis, in pithy lines like “...يا مبارك، يا مبارك، السعودية في انتظارك” (“Mubarak, O Mubarak, Saudi Arabia awaits you!”). In the streets themselves, there are scores of other verses, ranging from the caustic “شرطة مصر، يا شرطة مصر، أنتم فقط كلاب القصر” (“Egypt’s Police, Egypt’s Police, You’ve become nothing but Palace dogs”), to the defiant “اضرب، اضرب، يا حبيب، مهما تضرب لا نذهب” (Hit us, beat us, O Habib [al-Adly, now-former Minister of the Interior], hit all you want—we’re not going to leave!)<sup>(5)</sup>.

Like poems, many songs written by poets also have played its role in the recent Arab uprisings. The song named as “Rais Lebled” (رئيس للبلاد) written and sung by the young Tunisian poet Hammada bin Umar known as El General, became one of the most popular song of the Arab revolution and it is called as the anthem of the Tunisian revolution<sup>(6)</sup>. The demonstrators still sing the song of the best-known Syrian singer from the ranks of the opposition, Ibrahim Qashoush who was titled as the nightingale of the revolution, it starts with these lines:

يا الله، ارحل يا بشار  
و يا بشار مانك منا  
خوذ ماهر وارحل عنا

٤. من قصيدة “إرادة الحياة” للشاعر التونسي أبي القاسم الشابي.

5. “The poetry of the Revolt”, an essay by Prof. Elliot Colla.

6. www.wikipedia.org

و شرعيتك سقطت عنا  
و يلا ارحل يا بشار....

(Get out, Bashar... Bashar you are not one of us... Take Maher and leave us. Your legitimacy has fallen. Get out, Bashar...!)

Poets like Abdul Rahman al Abnudi, Waleed Fuad, Fareed Abu Sa'da, Hasan Thalab, Tamim Barguthi, Jamal Bakheeth, Hisham Kamil Abbas Jakh, Halmi Salim and Saadi Yousef are some of those who participated in the revolutionary activities during the Arab Spring with their inspirational and stimulating poems which acted as a catalyst for staying power.

Many more texts are sure to join these impulsive word creations, which have become a key aspect of the revolutionary culture and a contemporary form of agitprop, particularly in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. Let us hope that Arabic literature will continue to play a critical role towards developing peace and democracy, by reflecting on what the words democratic, free and just can mean in this world – and thus providing impetus for other regions also.

### Poetry before the Arab Spring

In order to understand the influence of the Arab Spring on the poetry, we have to be aware of the situations of the poetry under the dictatorial regimes. After being colonized by foreign forces, some Arab nations were subjected to a kind of 'self-colonization' by some dictators with the foreign support. As the poetry has the power to galvanize the people and inspire them to topple the regimes, the political authorities in these Arab countries were conscious about its 'traditional' influence on the people and

they were trying to put a control over all literary works, especially the poetry. During the dictatorial reigns there were a lot of state censorships and also the powerful force of auto-censorship.

As the poem is the spontaneous overflow the feelings, the poet must have in a platform with freedom of expression which cannot put a hindrance to the overflowing of his feelings. The Syrian poet and journalist Muhammed al-Maghut describes the freedom of the expression for a writer in his words: *"To become a great writer – regardless of which Arab country one is in – one must be truthful; to be truthful, one must be free; and to be free, one must be alive; yet to be alive, one must hold one's tongue!"*<sup>(7)</sup>. This vicious cycle was the main feature of the poetry under the dictatorial governments. Countless Arab writers and artists were trapped and caged over the past five decades. Creative individuals were subjected to threats, arrests and other methods of political repression, placing them under pressure and effectively gagging them if they expressed opinions critical of official policy. During a regime of controlled literature, it's risky to emerge powerful, evocative, genuine poetry.

Under the rigid atmosphere of the dictatorial rule, many poets exiled to other countries. For example Adnan al-Sayegh is one of the most original voices from the generation of Iraqi poets. His poetry, crafted with elegance, and sharp as an arrowhead, carries an intense passion

٧. "يجب علي المرء ليصبح كاتباً كبيراً في أي بلد عربي أن يكون صادقاً؛ وليكون صادقاً يجب عليه أن يكون حراً؛ وليكون حراً يجب عليه أن يكون حياً؛ ولكن ليظل حياً يجب عليه أن يبقى صامتاً" كلمات للشاعر والكاتب المسرحي والصحفي الإذاعي السوري محمد الماغوط (١٩٣٤-٢٠٠٦) في عام ١٩٨٤.

for freedom love and beauty. Adnan uses his words as a weapon to denounce the devastation of war and the horrors of dictatorship. In 1993 his uncompromising criticism of oppression and injustice, led to his exile in Jordan and the Lebanon. After being sentenced to death in Iraq in 1996, because of the publication of Uruk's Anthem, a long poem in which he gives voice to the profound despair of the Iraqi experience- he took refuge in Sweden. Since 2004 he lives in London <sup>(8)</sup>.

Hamad bin Amir, the Tunisian poet and rap musician was under the strict censorship of the autocratic regime of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. On December 24, 2010, two days after his second famous protest song "Tunisia Our Country" was released on YouTube and facebook and one week after the protests in Tunisia began; he was arrested by Tunisian police. Three days later, Ben Amor was released, after being forced to sign a statement to no longer make any political songs<sup>(9)</sup>.

During the 2011 Syrian uprising, the Syrian poet Ibrahim Qashoush, who was noted for singing and authoring songs mocking Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and the ruling Ba'ath party, was found dead in the Orontes River, his throat cut and his vocal cords ripped out <sup>(10)</sup>. In October of 2012, a court in Qatar sentenced the poet, Muhammed al Ajami to life in prison for incitement to overthrow the government and

criticizing the ruling Amir <sup>(11)</sup>. The continuous intimidations from the rulers compelled many poets to exile to other countries. Even those who lived in exile were very, very cautious because they could not talk or write freely out of fear for the safety of family members still in their home countries.

It's doubtless that the poetry will not grow and flourish in a strict, rigid situation. There for the poems composed before the Arab Spring had a style of obedience and submission. Those who stood for the state and its rulers were officially admired and awarded, while those poets who shout for the truth and their poems were strictly controlled.

### **Arabic poetry after the Arab Spring:**

As the Arab Spring was extremely influenced by the Arabic poetry, this political spring which blew strongly over all parts of the Arab world and caused for radical changes in the current political, social and economical scenarios, influenced the Arabic poetry as well. It caused in an innovation in the meanings carried by the poetry, its style and in the words used in it. The freedom from the dictatorial regime opened a vast world of possibilities for the Arabic poetry and resulted in an upsurge itself in the poetic creativity.

The restricted censorings and continuous threats from authorities prevented the poets to talk for the truth and criticize the brutal establishments. But, by the outburst of the revolts in the Arab world, the poets got some kind of courage to stand with the people on the streets and talk for them portraying the miserable

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8. [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

9. "El General and Rap Anthem of the Mideast Revolution" article by Vivienne Walt in Time.

10. "Ibrahim Qashoush, Syria Protest Songwriter, Gruesomely Killed", news reported by AP on 27/07/2011.

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11. "Qatari poet appeals over life prison sentence", news reported by BBC on 29/10/2012.

conditions of the ignored communities by the dictatorial 'empires'. This critical juncture helped the Arabic poetry to come out from the solidity and immobility suffered last few decades in most part of the Arab world. Once again Arabic poetry could stand with its own pride and dignity and sing for the tyrannized and unjustly treated middle and lower class peoples, this time not only in the street but also the newly populated social media. Really, the Tunisian street vendor, Muhammed Abu Azizi, not only set on fire himself, but also the fetters and manacles laid on the freedom of expression of the Arab poets.

The poet is the voice of his people and his words act as an evangelist and instigator of the society and he witnesses the most important in the lives of people. During the recent revolutions, the poets performed their role perfectly and they recited the poems for the sake of their community. The poets like Aul Qasim Shabi, Mahmood Darwish, Muhammad Maghouth, Swalah Jaheen and other revolutionary poets were once again alive through their immortal poems which influenced the thoughts of the living poets like Hasan Thalab, Tamim Barguthi, Fareed Abu Sa'ada, Waleed Fuaad, Abdur Rahman al-Abnudi, Jamal Bakheeth, Hisham Jakh and other poets who used their poetic 'magic' for the people.

The Arab Spring played a critical role to rejuvenate the vernacular poems as many of the poets were using the vernacular language in their poems in order to be able to enter the hearts of the low class, local people. For example, In Tahrir, the epicenter of the Egyptian revolution, the colloquial verse became the modus operandi

by which citizens expressed their revolutionary sentiments. The poem "إنجيل التوراة وقرآنها" composed by Hasan Thalab, the famous poems like "يا شعب مصر", "يا مصر هانت وبانت" by the Palestinian poet Tamim Barguti and the famous revolutionary poem named as "...دين أبوهم أيه" by Jamal Bakheeth are some examples of the poems composed in the colloquial and vernacular Arabic. This kind of poems was very helpful to pull the hearts of local people to the uprisings and to make them aware of their refused rights.

The Arab Spring resulted in an explosion of the protest poems in the Arabic poetry. The poems composed during and after the Arab uprisings have included the words depicting their refusal and irritation against the subjugating dictators. For example, Fareed Abu Sa'ada, the Egyptian poet says:

"قل لا هنا لتقولها في كل مملكة سواها،

هنا

حيث أدركت أنك حلمي

الذي يتكرر

كل منام ولا يتحقق..." (12)

These lines are extracts from his poem "أنا صرت غيري" which is a portrait of what happened at Tahrir Square in Egypt during the revolts. Here, we notice the powerful word of protest "لا" i.e. 'no', the symbol of bravery without surrender and submission to others. He says here: 'say, no, here, so that you can tell it in all other kingdoms'.

The famous Egyptian poet Hisham Kamil Abbas Jakh says in his poem

١٢. من ديوان "أنا صرت غيري...." لفريد أبي سعادة، نسختها  
المهينة العامة لتصور الثقافة، مصر.

”رأسي من ميدان التحرير“:  
 ”مزق دفاترك القديمة كلها  
 واكتب لمصر اليوم شعرا مثلها  
 لا صمت بعد اليوم يفرض خوفه  
 فاكتب سلاما نيل مصر وأهلها  
 عيناك أجمل طفلتين تقرراني  
 بأن هذا الخوف ماض وانتهى«

In these lines he asks the people to rewrite the history of the Egypt. Here he uses the word “مزق” i.e. to tear, which denotes the refusal of the current situations. His words “لا صمت بعد اليوم” which means “no silence from today”, is an example of the freedom of the Arabic poetry from the restrictions of the leading authorities and attaining the courage to break the silence and shout for the truths against the evil powers, which can be regarded as one of the changes witnessed by the Arab world after the outbreak of the so called Arab Spring.

The Egyptian poet Halmi Salim says:

”ارفع رأسك عالية، أنت مصري،  
 الصامت صبرا، لا إذعانا“<sup>(13)</sup>

‘Rise up your head highly, you are an Egyptian, You are silent because of your tolerance, not of your submission.’ It was unimaginable to say like these words in the regime of Husni Mubarak or any other dictators.

Not only in Egypt, but in all Arab countries

where this spring was passed, we can see these kind of changes in the theme of Arabic poetry. The courage and fearlessness are found widely in the poems composed after the outbreak of ‘Arab Revolution’. Here is the line from the poem “تونس الثورة” of the Tunisian poet Mahmood Ghanimi:

قد آن للظلماء أن تتبددا  
 ولتونس الخضراء أن تتجددا  
 الشعب قرّر أن يبّد خوفه  
 فالخوف في قلب الشعوب تبددا<sup>(14)</sup>

(It’s the time for the darkness to be scattered, and for the green Tunisia to rejuvenate. The people have decided to break up their fears, and thus the fear has scattered from the hearts of the people). We can find a lot of such examples of fearlessness and freedom in the poems composed after the Arab Spring.

The freedom from the dictatorial powers will pave the way for the exiled poets to come back to their home land and participate in the rebuilding their nations. It’s expected that the romantic poetry will come back to the life of the Arabs as a result of this new atmosphere.

After the emergence of the Arab Spring, many poets in the Arab world expect that this political spring which blows strongly over all parts of the Arab world, will augur well for Arab literature especially the poetry. The literature will start to regain its status in the life of the Arabs in the future because of the political changes which

١٣ . من ديوان ”ارفع رأسك عالية...“ للشاعر حليم سالم، نسختها الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب.

14 . من قصيدة ”تونس الثورة“ للشاعر التونسي محمود الغامبي.  
[http://ghanimimahmoud.blogspot.in/2012/03/\(blog-post\\_31.html](http://ghanimimahmoud.blogspot.in/2012/03/(blog-post_31.html)

caused in making the Arabs more optimistic. They believe that there will be a creative boom in all forms of the poetry.

## Conclusion

The Arab Spring, the Arab revolution to eradicate the dictatorial regimes in the Arab world, was deeply influenced by the Arabic poetry. People on the streets were inspired by the revolutionary poems which shouted for the freedom, democracy and other human rights. At the same time, these new movements in

the Arab countries gave a new life for the Arab poetry and built for it a safe and sound platform free from all shackles and fetters, to grow and flourish. Many changes were occurred in the themes of the poetry, in its style and the words used in it. As a result of the Arab Spring the Arabic poetry broke its silence and came out to stand with the people, for the people, protesting against the oppressing evils and demanding for the changes in all walks of life. It is expected that more creative boom will happen in the Arabic Poetry as a result of continuing changes in the Arab world.

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