

COMMENT

Arab Spring, IS and democracy

CRITICAL OUTCOME: Stability and progress in the region depends on the aptitude of governments to inspire a climate of public trust, appreciation and sincerity

THE emergence of the so-called Islamic State (IS) at the tail end of the Arab Spring confirmed once again that the import of Western democracy to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is not a cure for the deeply-rooted socio-political problems of the region.

Numerous Muslim thought leaders and governments have denounced the IS as being anti-Islamic and exhibiting behaviour that is antithetical to the core principles of the religion. Yet, the self-styled leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, claims global authority of the Muslim ummah in the manner of the caliphs of old.

Only three years back, the West welcomed the outbreak of the Arab Spring in the region, identifying it as birth of the "collective Arab/Muslim consciousness".

Global media highlighted the series of mass events in Tahrir Square and elsewhere, and their accompanying agitations throughout the region as harbingers of a liberal democracy and good governance in the Muslim World.

The criminal activities of IS and other largely retrogressive developments the Middle East has witnessed of late indicate the end of the Arab Spring, even though the revolutionary wave of mass protests and civil wars preceding them brought significant changes to the entire region. It is regrettable, however, that the Middle East is not enjoying either democracy or good governance.

Instead of positive changes, as many had expected, the Arab Spring brought widespread chaos, civil war, economic depression, insecurity

and loss of life. The evils of sectarianism and tribalism became rampant and are now threatening the fabric of society and state in the region. The Arab Spring has taught us many lessons.

Firstly, the full episode of that phenomenon confirmed the strength of the will of the masses. Upheavals across the MENA region were mainly sparked by persistent neglect of citizens' rights by their respective governments.

For decades, the region was exploited by those eager to control the resources and wealth of the nations with no concern for their people's welfare and will.

The citizens' rights for wellbeing, protection and human security, as

well as participation in decision-making processes, were largely ignored. No opportunity was made available to amend the unfair systems through peaceful means endorsed by Islamic teachings, such as consultation and participatory system of rule through fair elections, government accountability and advocacy of people's rights.

People were exhausted from the unending cycle of despotism, economic and political exploitation and poverty. They opted for change and took the revolutionary route to achieve it. The Arab Spring also manifested the potential of the youth. Arab youth had remained marginalised, isolated and excluded from decision-making processes. They were frustrated with their governments and played major roles in the transformation of their countries and the whole region.

The youth represent a significant portion of the MENA population. At present, more than half of its pop-



Iraqi security forces arresting suspected Islamic State militants in Hawija last year. The criminal activities of IS and other retrogressive developments in the Middle East indicates the end of the Arab Spring. Reuters pic

ulation is under the age of 25, and the needs and wants of such a significant portion of society cannot be neglected.

Secondly, the ongoing political transformation and recent elections did not mark the end of the post-colonial dictatorship in the MENA region. The Arab Spring clearly did not bring liberal democracy to the Muslim world. Rather, it triggered structural changes that shook the Arab landscape with likely long-term consequences.

Rapid political and social transformations are not for the benefit of the people. People in the post-Spring countries are suffering from socio-economic instability, poverty and discrimination. Radicalisation and violence are also on the increase in these countries. It seems that a regime change or change of government is not the answer to the ills of society and problems of dictatorship in the Arab countries.

Time will tell the end story of the Arab Spring phenomenon. Yet, its

negative consequences, such as political instability, nepotism and other social ills, have overshadowed any of its positive outcomes. Bridging the gap between the people and their ruling authorities will take much longer after the Arab Spring.

The United States drone attacks against the militant groups will neither address the region's problems nor help bring peace and stability. Rather, they provoke anger and despair in the hearts of victimised civilians, their families and friends. Muslim masses, particularly of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, have become disillusioned with the consequences of the US-led "War on Terror".

The world is going through a period of turmoil with the redistribution of natural resources and strategic regions among the super powers. People living in resource rich, yet underdeveloped areas, will once more suffer because of their strategic locations and their resources.

The challenges which the MENA

governments are facing today are immense. Prompt and proper responses from the authorities are urgently needed. The concept, principles and structure of governance, including its philosophy and fundamentals, need to be reviewed and comprehended by the authorities.

Stability and progress in the region depends mainly on the aptitude of the governments to inspire a climate of public trust, appreciation and sincerity between the political elite and the people. To succeed, the governments should learn to respond to the needs and benefits of their own people. They should find effective solutions to economic and social problems of their people.

Consideration of public welfare and public interest, and protection of the rights of the citizens and human dignity are the main ingredients of stability in the MENA region. The promising potential of youth should be recognised and directed through education, careful supervision and respect.



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