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POLITICAL TURMOIL IN THE MIDDLE EAST: AN OVERVIEW

Abstract

Over the last couple of months, the Middle East has been the epicentre of turmoil. The protests for changing the long authoritarian regimes by the civilians have gradually become the flash point of crises throughout the region. After the political unrests in Tunisia and Egypt, conflicts have been spreading in different parts of the region such as Syria, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco and more precisely in Libya. By now, the involvement of NATO including the USA and other external powers in Libya has been a food for thought for the whole world as to what is going on in this region. The overall situation raises a lot of questions regarding whether the protests would pave the way for democracy or intensify more turbulence and instability. In this backdrop, the main intention of the paper is to highlight the existing situation of the region coupled with the root causes of the conflicts as well as the implications of the crises. Given that, the paper tries to assess the future prospects of democracy in the region. Along with this discussion, the paper has also looked into the role of external powers in the crises.

1. Introduction

At present, the situation in the Middle East¹ (ME) is very fluid and volatile. Conflicts and agitations are spreading from the ME to North Africa as the

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¹ There are varied opinions regarding what countries make up the ME region. According to modern definition, the ME region incorporates the countries of both Western Asia and North Africa like Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Israel, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Palestine, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain. The Maghreb, the western part of North Africa, encompasses five modern countries including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania as most of them are Islamic Republic. Only, Egypt is taken into account both in North Africa and the ME. See, "What countries make up the Middle East?", available at: http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_countries_make_up_the_Middle_East#ixzz1Jy6MOyu, accessed on: 19 April 2011.

civilians are demanding for social and political reforms, withdrawal of authoritarian rules as well as establishing democratic governments. The spark of mass protest that exploded into fire first in Tunisia has very intense and wide spread ramifications throughout the ME. Thereafter, Egypt, the biggest country in the Arab world, faced a massive demonstration commenced from 25 January 2011.² President Hosni Mubarak, in his three decades of rules, faced the stiffest challenges ever and was compelled to resign after 18 days of public protests. Following the political unrests in Egypt and Tunisia, the wave of mass demonstration is gripping across the other Arab countries including Yemen, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Libya.

The situations in these countries are unstable and rapidly turning into a new dimension with every passing day. What are the repercussions and post-crises scenario of the nationwide anti-government protests in the volatile countries? What explains the departure of Hosni Mubarak and Ben Ali after their long autocratic rules? What is the role of external powers, predominantly the US in the Libyan crises? What is the future of democracy especially in Egypt and other ME countries in general? These are the pertinent questions that the paper has attempted to answer. The paper argues that the sequential crises in the ME might pave the way for democracy in the region although it is rather difficult to establish and attain democracy owing to several obvious complexities.

The paper is organised in the following order. After introduction, Section 2 highlights the recent crises in the ME. Section 3 sheds light on the political regimes of the ME countries. Section 4 tries to identify the root causes of the current turmoil while Section 5 discusses its repercussions. In Section 6, the role of the USA as well as other external powers is analysed focusing on Libya. Finally, before conclusion in Section 8, Section 7 tries to foresee the prospect of democracy in the ME countries. Egypt, in particular, is focused more in the paper as it is the largest nation with 83 million population, centre of civilisation and growing economy in the region. Besides, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Algeria as well as other countries are also touched upon depending on the magnitude of the crises.

2. The Recent Crises

The unprecedented protests actually erupted from the Tunisian uprising in December 2010 through the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. The countrywide revolt, popularly known as the “Jasmine Revolution” turned out to be the biggest uprising within three decades in Tunisia. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the despotic ruler of Tunisia, who dictated the country for nearly two decades since 1988, was finally forced to resign against the backdrop of massive

² *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 26 January 2011.

revolutionary wave of protests. The overthrow of Ben Ali, nevertheless, was a blow which worked as an eye opener for the entire region and inspired others who wanted to oust their authoritarian regimes. Following the event, there had been an unprecedented movement of solidarity coined as 'Lotus Revolution'/'Revolution 2.0' taking place in Egypt since the last week of January 2011. Millions of people demonstrated in the historic Tahrir (Liberation) Square, the epicentre of the revolution in Cairo, including other parts of the country viz. Alexandria, Ismailia and Suez demanding the resignation of President Mubarak. During the 18 days of blood-spattered upheaval between the pro-democracy protesters and Pro-Mubarak supporters, nearly 846 demonstrators lost their lives.³ Egypt's political unrest was actively supported by Mohamed ElBaradei, former Director General of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and a pro-democracy advocate in the country. Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition party, also involved with the general people who unified themselves using different mediums of social network such as mobile, face book, twitter, and other electronic media. To keep his hold on power, President Mubarak reformed the cabinet wherein Mr. Omar Suleiman, the former Chief of Intelligence, was appointed as Vice President and Ahmed Shafik, the erstwhile Aviation Minister as the Prime Minister. Mr. Suleiman was highly criticised by the media as people were against this appointment.

Apart from Tunisia and Egypt, a series of demonstrations are witnessed in Algeria, Bahrain, Morocco, Yemen, Syria, and Libya while some minor and sporadic incidents took place in Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other North African countries viz. Somalia and Sudan (see details in Annex 1).⁴ Among these countries, Syria and Libya are experiencing massive anti-government demonstrations at present. In Syria, there has been an incessant state of emergency situation since 1963. Despite this, Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad has been facing the most challenging time due to current political turmoil by the protesters. On the other hand, the spark of revolt is ignited in Libya where the current humanitarian situation is extremely dreadful. The protest is unprecedented that has been expected to cause the death toll of around 10,000 to 30,000.⁵ Notwithstanding the unsteady situation, President Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi has announced to stay in office, leading the procession and encouraging the pro-government supporters to protest against the mass upheaval. The gradual exacerbating crisis situation brought the country in the brink of civil war. In the

³ Maggie Michael, "True figure for Egypt's death toll put at 846", available at: <http://news.scotsman.com/world/True-figure-for-Egypt39s-death.6755378.jp>, accessed on: 02 May 2011.

⁴ Lyn Thomas, "Middle East in Revolt", available at: <http://www.tropicpost.com/middle-east-in-revolt/>, accessed on: 23 February 2011.

⁵ Bill Corcoran, "Gaddafi vows to stay as death toll climbs in Libya", available at: <http://www.sbpost.ie/news/world/gaddafi-vows-to-stay-as-death-toll-climbs-in-libya-56017.html>, accessed on: 04 May 2011.

midst, the sending of warships from the US including the involvement of other powers and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have created a stalemate situation.

3. Political Regimes in the ME Countries

It can be noted that nowhere in the world except the ME and few other countries of South East Asia (viz. Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia) endure long dictatorship even in the twenty-first century. The question remains - how the countries in this region have endured this long dictatorship? It may be pointed out that since the 1950s, the political system in Arab world is either controlled by the paternalist iron men or kings (*Emirs*) and there is no democratic practice at all. This monarchic system, however, has been gradually threatened with the change of modern world due to absence of parliamentary system which generally addresses the grievances of the greater mass. Even, there is no existence of organised political parties, and army has a strong role in Arab politics. Beginning with Tunisia, it is agreed that President Ben Ali's regime is the most tyrannical one among the Arab countries.⁶ As shown in Annex 2, it is seen that this former General of Armed Forces, ruled the country for more than 23 years and was elected as President for 5 times with 89-99 per cent of votes every time.⁷ Ben Ali himself amended the Constitution in 2002 to be re-elected as President with provision for holding the power for unlimited times. The rigged elections always helped him to win and he never allowed Al-Nadha, the opposition party, to come into power despite getting a majority vote.

Another worse example is Algeria where the victory of opposition party is never accepted by the ruling party despite introducing the multi-party politics in 1989. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the ninth President of Algeria, has been ruling the country for more than a decade since 1999. His third term as President with almost 90 per cent votes in 2009 was highly criticised by the opposition party known as Socialist Forces Front (SFF) that boycotted the election alleging that it was fraudulent and full of corruption. Similar event took place earlier when Algerian government hold a free and fair election in 1991. Despite the triumph of SFF, the military-political elites postponed the election staging a coup backed by the West and declared a state of emergency in 1992 which has been continuing till to date. The event, however, led to a prolonged civil war for ten years that caused the death of nearly 200,000 innocent civilians.⁸ Likewise in Syria, after the death of Hafez al-Assad who dictated the country for long 29 years, his son

⁶ *The Guardian*, UK, 15 January 2011.

⁷ Rahnuma Ahmed, "Go, Mubarak go! USA's tottering user-friendly tyrants...", available at: <http://www.shahidulnews.com/2011/02/go-mubarak-go-usas-tottering-user-friendly-tyran>, accessed on: 25 February 2011.

⁸ Anwar Islam, "Beginning of the End of US Hegemony in Middle East", *The New Age*, Dhaka, 24 February 2011.

Bashar al-Assad has been ruling the country for 11 years and nominated himself as the leader of Baath Party and the Army. The age for being selected as President of Syria is 40 years. Notwithstanding that, the candidate's age had been lowered to 34 for Bashar, and he was the sole candidate who had been selected as President for another 7 years in 2007.

In line with Tunisia, Algeria, and Syria, political system in Egypt is not promising, rather it has been stagnated. In 1981, after the assassination of Anwar Sadat who was the advocate of Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, Mubarak, the Vice President of Sadat, came into power. Since 1981, President Mubarak has been extending the duration of emergency rule every three years. Like his predecessor, President Mubarak formed his own party known as National Democratic Party (NDP) and maintained an untainted monarchic political system that there was no vice president during his three decades of rule. Surprisingly, for the last 30 years, Mubarak, who was the former Head of Air Force, had clutched on to the power and won the election every time with 98 per cent votes downsizing other political parties.⁹ During his regime, he never allowed the formation of any opposition party. Also, it is very appalling that President Mubarak preserved only 3 per cent of seats for the opposition party in the last parliamentary election in November 2010.¹⁰

Similar is the case in Yemen where President Ali Abdullah Saleh was re-elected through the first direct presidential election in September 1999. Recently, he announced to remain in power until 2013 though he was being pressurised to resign through continuous massive demonstration. During his regime, the country had been ruled by one party usually known as the General People's Congress (GPC) since 1990 when North and South Yemen were merged together. Although there remained other opposition parties, they were never allowed to come in power. In Bahrain too, the scenario is similar. 70 per cent of its demography is Shia who has been discriminated for long by the Sunni rulers.¹¹ King Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa nominated from the Sunni minority group has the legal authority to directly appoint the Executives (like Prime Minister and Cabinet members) and the members of Shura Council. The constitutional monarchy of King Khalifa, however, was highly criticised by the Shia as well as by the Sunni Islamic parties.

Libya is another example where the ruling party is all in all initially backed by the army. Till very recently, Libyan President Colonel Gaddafi has been one of the longest autocrat rulers in the world. Since the overthrow of monarchy in 1969, Gaddafi came into power through a military coup and has been dictating

⁹ *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 30 January 2011.

¹⁰ "Manifesto for change in Egypt", *The Daily Star*, 01 February 2011.

¹¹ Muslehuddin Ahmed, "The Middle east is now a volatile region", *The Independent*, Dhaka, 24 February 2011.

the country for the last 42 years. During his regime, he formed an atypical ruling system in which all the political parties and trade unions were banned by the 1972 Prohibition of Party Politics Act. Army is his main source of power and he started ruling the country with the formation of People's Congress where his word is considered as 'law'.¹²

Thus, it can be argued on the whole that the rulers in the ME have exercised despotic power which backed them to stay in power for long time. In these countries, the acts of parliaments are a mockery where the rulers have the rights to amend constitutions, dissolve legislation, and dictate judiciary according to their own will when necessary. Although the leaders of opposite political parties of these countries are eager to participate in the elections through participatory process, they were always excluded by the ruling parties considering them as state's perpetual enemies.

4. Root Causes of Current Turmoil

It may well be said that the autocratic rules, absence of democracy, nepotism as well as discrimination provided grounds for the break out of massive riots in the ME countries. Besides, the outburst of general mass in the ME is not for a particular reason, rather, it is the result of their past grievances and sufferings. In Algeria, for instance, the periodic events of demonstrations that took place in 2010 made it the most 'unhappy' country.¹³ In each demonstration of the ME countries, the protesters have been demanding the end of autocratic rules due to their rampant corruption in a systematic manner. As shown in Table 1, among the protesting countries, corruption is widespread mostly in Libya and Yemen according to 2010 Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Tunisia, Libya and Egypt are not far behind in this regard. President Mubarak has around US\$70 billion of wealth which makes him one of the richest persons in the world.¹⁴ Like President Mubarak, as is reported, President Gaddafi also illegally consolidated several billions of resources at home and abroad depriving the citizens of his own country.

Table1. Overall Performance of the Arab Countries

¹² *The Daily Ittefaq*, (Bangla), Dhaka, 05 March 2011.

¹³ Saïd Sadi, "The Leader of the Rally for Culture and Democracy", available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010%E2%80%932011_Algerian_protests 5/6 ref, accessed on: 18 February 2011.

¹⁴ *The Guardian*, UK, 04 February 2011.

Country	2010 Estimates		Unemployed People (1996-2005), Thousands	GDP Per Person (2008), US\$.000 Purchasing Power Parity	2010 Ranking For	
	Total Population (Million)	Percentage of Youth (under 25)			Corruption*	Freedom of Press+
Tunisia	10.4	42.1	486	8.6	59	186
Algeria	35.9	47.5	14,75	8.2	105	141
Libya	6.5	47.4	-	18.7	146	193
Yemen	24.3	65.4	469	2.9	146	173
Egypt	84.6	52.3	22,41	5.9	98	130
Syria	22.5	55.3	638	4.7	127	178
Bahrain	1.2	43.9	16	24.0	48	153

Source: "Briefing the Upheaval in Egypt: An End or Beginning?", *The Economist*, UK, 05 February 2011; Arab Human Development Report 2009.

*out of 178 countries, +out of 196 countries.

Apart from anarchy with rampant corruption, rising food prices, oppression, absence of freedom and existence of inequality are the other significant sources of anxieties among the general mass. Although the average Arab people are well-off, there is a huge gap between the rich and the poor, and wealth is concentrated in certain segment of the population. In Egypt for example, 40 per cent of civilian earn less than US\$ 2 a day.¹⁵ In Bahrain, the widespread discrepancy between the haves and have-nots and discrimination by the Sunni rulers for years ignited the Shia uprising. The frustration regarding unemployment in these countries was so extreme that people chose self-immolation attempts as a means of protest. The glaring examples are Algerian Mohamed Aouichia and Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi who set themselves on fire during the protests.

Moreover, the recent uprising is more of a resentment of the youth. Of the total population of each demonstrating country, around half of the population is less than 25 years old (Table1). High level of youth unemployment and their dissatisfaction is conceivably another factor that fuels the antipathy in many of these countries. In Egypt, the riot had a new dimension as the youth, in particular, led the demonstration considering that the current autocratic regime has failed to address their long standing sufferings. The fearless leadership of the youth against the rulers is indeed a psychologically crucial factor to exhilarate the revolts.

Another concomitant issue that needs to be considered behind the unprecedented uprising is "people's power". This can be explained from the power concepts of international relations. Joseph Nye, one of the prominent International Relations scholars, explained the change of society with two

¹⁵ *The Economist*, UK, 2010, *op.cit.*

distinct power concepts popularly known as “soft power” and “hard power”.¹⁶ He added another term called “smart power” where the new generation recreates themselves breaking the traditional control. In smart power, access to information is an important constituent in today’s information age. This is fully perceived throughout the ME followed by Tunisian movement where the new generation creates a political space using face book, twitter, internet and satellites what is called ‘Twitter Revolution’ or ‘Face Book Revolution’. The impacts of new technology and rise of social movement are so sturdy that these help to break the information monopolies of the autocratic rulers in the region.

5. Implications of Arab Uprising

Undoubtedly, the shaking of middle class, educated class, and the digital and westernised youth have remarkably paved the way for democratic process and democratic culture. Despite the positive outcome, the unprecedented demonstrations might bring adverse social, economic and security implications in the region and beyond.

5.1. Social and Humanitarian

The wave of protests has already pushed the people from one place to another. Many people from Libya, Syria, Yemen and other unstable countries have been trying to cross the border to take shelter in the neighbouring countries. Due to ongoing unrest in Libya, around 75 thousand people fled the country and more than 40 thousand people are waiting in Libya-Tunisian border.¹⁷ This is increasing the refugee problem throughout the ME countries especially in Tunisia, Niger and Egypt. Due to flow of innumerable people in Libyan border areas, tension is mounting along with shortage of food, water, fuel and medicine. It is imperative to note that currently, unemployment rate and people below the poverty line in the region ranged from 8.3 to 13.4 per cent and 3.8 to 45.2 per cent respectively.¹⁸ Quite obviously, it might further increase poverty and job insecurity due to damage of infrastructure and shutdown of industries, mills and factories.

5.2. Security

The internal security system has come under threat due to looting, mugging and assaulting in the conflict ridden countries. The raids on petrol stations, banks and houses are collapsing the security systems in such countries. Furthermore, it

¹⁶ “Soft Power” denotes the non traditional forces of an actor such as culture, values, institution etc. while “hard power” refers to the military and economic forces which are used in war, coercion, deterrence and protection. For details, see, Joseph .S. Nye, *The Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004.

¹⁷ *The Daily Ittefaq*, (Bangla), Dhaka, 03 March 2011.

¹⁸ A.B.M.S. Zahur, “Exit of Hosni Mubarak”, *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 24 February 2011.

has escalated the wave of violence. In Syria, for example, the black market of arms has been enormously booming as people have been rushing to purchase light weapons from the neighbouring countries such as Lebanon to bring down the government since January 2011.¹⁹ Furthermore, it has not only destabilised the internal security system but also increased regional political instability. Security analysts in this regard believe that the Middle East peace process might be under strain due to the uncertainty of acting upon the peace treaties of Israelis and the Palestinians.²⁰ As Egypt is the mediator and administrator of many negotiations between Israel and the Palestine, the peace process might be very sluggish for unlimited time. More precisely, Omar Suleiman, the former Chief of Egyptian Military Intelligence, generally persuaded the peace deal between Israel and Palestine. Therefore, absence of Mubarak regime might change the political scenario in the region and bring the ME peace process at a prolonged stalemate.

5.3. *Economic*

The demonstrations in the ME have not only increased the unrest of domestic economy but also have an adverse impact on the world's economy. Many security experts opined that the oil price might increase faster if the passage of oil flow through the Suez Canal to the West is obstructed.²¹ Egypt has been suffering heavily as it has to close different tourist spots. On the other hand, Libya is the fourth largest oil producing country which exports 1.2 million barrel of oil of the 1.6 million barrel of oil production each day.²² Due to current political turmoil in this country, different oil companies have shut down and staffs have been evacuated, thereby impacting negatively on oil supply. Because of the destruction of oil fields in Libya and other oil producing countries, per barrel oil price went up to US\$ 117.36 which was recorded significantly higher since the beginning of this year.²³ Conceivably, this oil supply disruption might swell inflation through out the world.

The blow of protests has brought huge repercussions not only on oil industry but also on manpower export sector. Indeed, the manpower exporting countries like Vietnam, India, China, as well as Bangladesh are suffering the most. For Bangladesh, the 22 Arab countries are the largest overseas employment markets of skilled and semi-skilled labours. Among these countries, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain and other nine Arab speaking countries make up almost 82 per cent of

¹⁹ Al Jazeera, "As Arab Spring continues, black markets boom", 14 May 2011.

²⁰ *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 17 January 2011.

²¹ *Ibid*, 01 February 2011.

²² *Ibid*, 24 February 2011.

²³ "Crude oil prices rise to new peak as Libyan crisis worsens", available at: <http://www.daybreakingnews.com/post/Crude-oil-prices-rise-Libyan-crisis-worsens.aspx>, accessed on: 04 May 2011.

the total Bangladeshi overseas employment.²⁴ Only in Libya, around 95 thousand labourers used to work and many of them are now waiting in Tunisian border to come back home and some have already returned to Bangladesh. The fear is that the sudden return of this large number of workers might increase unemployment problem in the country and reduce remittance flow in the years to come.

6. Role of External Forces

The humanitarian crisis and security circumstances, as discussed above, got aggravated due to attacks and counter attacks and the harsh responses of the governments against the protesters. In Tunisia or Egypt, there is no direct foreign intervention what is somewhat perceived in Libya. While the international organisation, like the United Nations (UN) has to respect sovereignty and independence of each member country, it is the most striking thing that the external powers have got involved in Libyan crises despite having several UN authorised humanitarian and military interventions. The significant points here are: does it mean the failure of the UN to halt the humanitarian tragedy? Or, does the intervention of external power violate the sovereignty of a state? How far has the attack been justified from ethical, legal, and political points of view or from the contexts of international law and state's sovereignty?

However, on 26 February 2011, the UN Security Council (UNSC) collectively adopted resolution against Libyan President Gaddafi to impose arms embargo, call for an investigation of attacks against the civilians as well as freeze the assets of Gaddafi's family.²⁵ Notwithstanding these efforts to protect the helpless people, the involvement of the USA and its alliances in the NATO-led operation was highly debated. Though the joint operation commenced in March 2011 by the British and French forces, the US had deliberately helped by providing the tactical supports. On the other side, Russia and China strongly opposed this intervention arguing that this sort of venture is the clear violation of the UNSC Resolution No. 1973. Considering the existing political situation, the intervention of coalition air forces in the form of enforcing no-fly zone to protect the innocent people in Libya has become a dilemma. There is a great debate whether no-fly zone initiative is a US-led venture raising the question of legitimacy. Nevertheless, it is important to ponder that the US has already involved in a number of wars in the region. Looking back to Afghanistan and Iraq, it is perceived that thousands of US troops have already been involved in these countries to conduct the operations. Many, including the Arab League

²⁴ Mashiur Rahman, "Drop in ME jobs feared", *The Independent*, Dhaka, 24 February 2011.

²⁵ Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Yang Razali Kassim, "Libya and the UN: Whose Responsibility to Protect?", Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 04 March 2011.

opine that the intervention has been a severe attack against a Muslim country by the Western powers that might increase extremism further.²⁶

Either in Egypt or Tunisia, the role of external power was at a very limited scale. Therefore, the response by the US in Libyan case increasingly gives birth to a question as to why did the US involve in Libya? Why not Egypt, Syria or other conflicting countries? In this regard, there might have been several strategic implications/equations for the USA to get involved in Libya. In this regard, the US President Barak Obama expressed his opinion that the main purpose is not to oust the Libyan President Gaddafi but to protect the innocent Libyan people.²⁷ Also, he justified the attack stating that his country has the moral responsibility to halt the atrocities committed by Gaddafi.

Despite the humanitarian issue, there seems to be other motivational factors for the US to get involved in Libya. President Obama has already declared that the US interest will be given utmost priority in Libya and the ME. It is important to highlight that Libya has a geo-strategic importance as it is situated in the Greater Middle East convergent with Asia, Europe and Africa. Also, it is adjacent to greater Mediterranean Sea. The country is undoubtedly very rich in oil as its contribution in world market is three times more than that of Yemen, Jordan and Sudan combined.²⁸ Perhaps, this is the most important motive for the US to intervene in the country. Whatever the motives of the USA, it is perceived that the role of this superpower is distinct and diverse in each country and the prime goal is to preserve its own interest. Against this existing setting, it is pertinent to foresee the future prospects of democracy in the entire region.

7. Future of Democracy in the ME

Despite the volatile situations and the intervention of external powers, the question of democracy is gaining momentum in all the protesting countries. The political turmoil in Tunisia and Egypt is almost over but democracy is yet to usher in. Therefore, the departure of President Ben Ali and Mubarak and the ending of their authoritarian rules and single party domination generated numerous questions and queries as to whether the events would really open up a new horizon of democracy in these countries? Needless to say that the future of democracy in these countries depends on various equations and preconditions as discussed below.

²⁶ Zulkifli Bin Mohamed Sultan and Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "Solving the Libyan Quagmire: Exile Option for Gaddafi?", Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 09 March 2011.

²⁷ Babjee Pothuraju, "US Role in Libya: Declining Hegemony?", Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), *IDSA Comment*, 10 May 2011.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Firstly, the efficiency of political actors/political representatives from top to bottom is very crucial to achieve transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The responsible political actors can create a positive environment for an effective electoral democracy in which people could get sufficient control of the government policies and strategies, reflecting their needs and interests. The ME countries, however, lacked the preconditions. It cannot be denied that army is the vanguard of all the political activities in almost all these countries which are less likely to establish a conducive environment for democracy in the ME. For instance, Egypt has the world's 10th largest military force that had ruled the country since 1952. The army has always been powerful in Egypt and involved in all types of administrative and commercial activities. There was no people's participation at all. Besides, other elite groups, former cabinet members as well as bureaucrats are comprised of former army and security staffs who worked closely with the ruling cliques.²⁹ Mubarak's NDP has been recently banned. Under this circumstance, it is very difficult to project how democracy will prevail in the country where people are totally inexperienced about democratic practice?

Secondly, public trust in the political institutions is fundamental for smooth functioning of democracy. In Egypt and Tunisia, people have trust deficit in army/interim government regarding their paradoxical roles in the protests. It is doubtful whether army would arrange a free and fair election through participatory process. History shows that army did not leave power quite easily once they came in office and this was perceived earlier in Syria and Iraq. Hence, there is a concern whether history would repeat itself. Like Egypt, the role of interim government in Tunisia is very crucial to organise a fair election in July 2011 or later, elect a new government and understand the overall future direction of the country. Till now, people are sceptic of the interim government whether they might put forward their own candidates despite the pledge of Prime Minister Ghannouchi to hold new election according to Tunisian Constitution.

Thirdly, David Beetham, a political scientist, put stress on two preconditions of an electoral democracy, (i) a 'functioning state' which has the capacity to enforce law; and (ii) 'agreement on nationhood' that denotes the subjects and agents of that rule.³⁰ It goes without saying that democracy in the ME is still in a nascent stage and there is no organised democratic party either in Egypt, Libya or in Tunisia. Although the ruling parties formed different political parties from time to time, they formed those parties to preserve their own interests. Therefore, the parties do not have any particular ideology. In Egypt, President Mubarak and

²⁹ Mushahid Ali, "After the Face book Revolution, Whither Egypt?", *RSIS Commentaries*, available at: <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/RSIS0222011.pdf>, accessed on: 04 March 2011.

³⁰ David Beetham, "Structural and Cultural Preconditions of Democracy", Society for International Development (SID), Netherlands Chapter, 2008.

his predecessors viz Gamal Abdel Naser and Anwar Saadat never allowed any political party that resulted in a political vacuum in the country. Despite that, Muslim Brotherhood, the banned Islamic ideologist and non-violent group (since 1950s) has been trying to become more organised and has played a greater role in the recent turmoil in order to attain peace and democracy in the country. The concern is, they also do not have any distinct political ideology or political vision. Even, they announced that they might not give any candidate for the next election giving the impression that they did not protest for occupying power. On the other hand, ElBaradei cannot be considered the representative of general people as he has been staying outside the country for long. Also, he is not involved in any political process and believes in some form of Western ideology. On the other hand, the situation of Libya, for instance, has demolished the status of a functioning state, created a social division and destroyed the sense of nationhood. These gave birth to a lot of uncertainties about who would serve on behalf of the country after Gaddafi and whether there would be any organised political party with strong leadership that could lead the country in future.

Fourthly, it is acknowledged that the external actors are very crucial as they could influence various events and decision making process. Also, the implementation of strategies depends on how far the international organisation and external powers can get involved in the respective states.³¹ As an international actor, the role of the US coupled with its regional strategy is pivotal to predict the future of democracy in the region. Egypt is the cornerstone of the US policy in the ME while Tunisia is strongly backed by this super power. Therefore, real change of regime in these countries might depend on the interests of the US. President Mubarak, for example, has been a trusted partner of anti-terrorist campaign of the US for a decade. Hence, the US is calculating how to accommodate with the change of Arab world. The key question here is power. In addition, the US is the largest donor of the Egyptian economy that contributes \$1.3 billion in aid each year. It is also the largest supplier of weapons in the oil rich ME countries.³² Although President Obama requested President Mubarak for an orderly transition, the dilemma of USA in the ME might have a deep implication. The US is concerned about post Mubarak government and the future role of Muslim Brotherhood. If Muslim Brotherhood comes in power, they might hamper the US interest in the region as Hezbollah and Hamas, the non-state actors in Lebanon and Palestine, are inspired by the ideology of Muslim Brotherhood and they might regroup.³³ Same is also evident in Tunisia that

³¹ Robert, *op.cit.* Also see, Norma Osterberg-Kaufmann, “Preconditions of Democracy: The Impact of Social Capital and Communist Legacies”, Ph.D Project on *Success and Failure of Democratization Process.: Two Case Studies, Albania and Croatia*, Berlin Graduate School of Social Science, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany, (Undated).

³² Harun ur Rashid, “Tunisia and domino effect”, *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 02 February 2011. Also see, Anwar Islam, *op.cit.*

³³ A.B.M.S. Zahur, *op.cit.*

Islamist Front led by Rashid al-Ghannushi might emerge as a strong entity that might reduce the US influence in the country.

Fifthly, Israel is the largest stakeholder in the ME region and an important factor for Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Therefore, Israel might have intended or unintended influence in various ways and channels. Egypt shares a long border with Israel while Tunisia is its distant neighbour. On the contrary, Libya- Israel relations are cold as the former never recognised Israel as a state. Though like Libya, most of the Arab countries have bitter relations with Israel, Egypt is the first Arab nation which established diplomatic ties with this country. In 1979, Egypt signed a peace treaty³⁴ with Israel that worked smoothly during President Mubarak's regime. In the post Mubarak phase, Israel apparently wants a government which would not pose a threat to its security. This could also be the view of the US. Therefore, it is important to see how the Arab countries respond to the western demands. There has always been an apprehension that the US and Israel's desire to have such type of Egyptian government might hamper/damage the democratic process.

Finally, political consolidation such as creating democratic culture, ensuring equal participation and establishing political institutions (eg. parliament and political party) are the right paths to achieve democracy.³⁵ Also, during the transition period, the role of civil society is very pertinent as the elite groups can work as a bridge between the government party and the opposition. However, in the ME, it goes without saying that these prerequisites are completely absent. Rather, mass communication sets an example to express people's new waves of freedom and their march for democracy. Not surely, it would always be conducive and bring positive outcome in the long run. The reason is, people who became unified and expressed their solidarity via internet generated the fear that they had distinct perceptions and ideologies in absence of any strong leadership with guidelines. In case of Egypt, it is seen that the demonstrators tried to mobilise power and organise a social movement rather than forming a political party. Some demanded the rights of freedom of speech while others wanted to promote human and labour rights. However, without any authorisation of political party, it is very difficult to mobilise the people. Therefore, there remains a question - how the people including the youthful reformists through social networks would be organised to contribute in future democratic process and produce substitute leaders to lead the post Mubarak and Ben Ali phases.

8. Conclusion

³⁴ According to the peace treaty, Israel returned Sinai Peninsula to Egypt and in return, Egypt agreed to demilitarise the peninsula.

³⁵ Robert Pinkney, *Democracy in the Third World* (2nd edition), Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2004.

The protests from Tahrir square in Egypt to Pearl Square in Bahrain indicate that change has already started in Arab traditional politics. Undoubtedly, the stepping down of President Ben Ali or President Mubarak was a great victory for the common people though the departures of the Presidents in Egypt and Tunisia do not necessarily mean that these countries have already become democratic in true sense. Rather, it is just the beginning of the democratic process and the countries have to go a long way. In addition to that, the future of democracy will depend on the interests of the big powers, and most importantly, on the army/the interim government. If they could ensure the political and economic emancipation of the people, it is not surprising that democracy will prevail in the ME countries and people in the region will live with freedom and dignity.

Annex 1. Overall Scenario of Major and Significant Protests in the Arab World

Country	Protest Started/Ended	Pioneer/s of the Protest	Magnitude/Forms of the Protest	Number of Death Toll	End Result/ Outcome
Tunisia	18 December 2010/ 14 January 2011	Mohamed Bouazizi	Strike, riots, attack of ruling party, etc.	More than 200 People	Withdrawal of President Ben Ali, formation of new government under Prime Minister Ghannouchi
Algeria	28 December 2010/on going	Mohamed Aouichia, Mohsen Bouterfif	Road blocking, riots, clashes with protesters and security forces	8 People	Lifting the 19 years long State of Emergency based on the Constitution
Libya	13 January 2011/on going	-	Protests in Benghazi, Tripoli & other cities, attacks of administrative building	10,000 to 30,000 People	Liberation of Benghazi and other few cities, occupation of Misurata by the general mass.
Yemen	18 January 2011	-	Riots and conflicts between protesters and government party	More than 1400 people	President Ali Abdullah Saleh's announcement of withdrawal from power in 2013 and resignation of MPs from ruling party.
Egypt	25 January /12 February	Youth, April 6 Movement	Strike, riots, civil resistance	846 People	Mubarak's stepping down from power
Syria	26 January/Ongoing	Youths of Syria	Conflicts between Syrian police and civilians	2700 people or more	Release of Communist Labour Party Leaders, withdrawal of emergency law and resign of the government
Bahrain	14 February/on going	Shia leader Ibrahim Matta	Protest in Manama city and occupation of significant public places	36 people	Release of political prisoners, King Hamad's declaration of giving incentives (1,000 <i>dinars</i>) to each family, national dialogue between general public and Crown Prince Salman and withdrawal of army from Pearl Square

Source: Compiled from different sources by the author.

Annex 2: Overall View of Political Regimes in the Arab World

Country	Ruler	Accession Date	Tenure	Political Parties / Groups	2010 World Ranking for Democracy*
Tunisia	Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali/ (Mohamed Ghannouchi at present)	1988	23	Al-Nahda	144
Algeria	Abdelaziz Bouteflika	1999	12	Left-wing opposition parties like The Socialist Forces Front, Salvation Front, Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH), Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), Party of Liberty and Justice (PLJ), Socialist Vanguard Party (SVP) etc.	125
Libya	Muammar Gaddafi	1969	42	Arab Socialist Union Democratic Party, Libyan National Movement, The National Front for the Salvation of Libya etc.	158
Yemen	Ali Abdullah Saleh	1978	33	General People's Congress, Al-Islah, The Yemeni Socialist Party, Arab Socialist Rebirth Party, Hizb ut-Tahrir etc.	146
Egypt	Hosni Mubarak	1981	30	Muslim Brotherhood, April-6 Movement	138
Syria	Bashar Al-Assad	2000	11	Arab Socialist Baath Party, Arab	

				Socialist Movement, Arab Socialist Union, Communist Party of Syria, Syrian Social Nationalist Party etc.	
Bahrain	Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa	1999	12	Islamist Parties (Al Asalah, Al Menbar, Al Wefaq etc.); Secular Parties (Al Meethaq, Economists Bloc, National Justice Movement, etc.); Opposition Parties (Al Wafa Islamic Party, Haq Movement, Khalas Movement, etc).	122

Source: Compiled from different sources by the author, *out of 167 countries.