

Book Review

Whither the Arab World?

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Arab World in Transition and the Quest for a New Regional Order

By Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui

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This significant new book authored by Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui, offers an overview of the trajectory of the unfolding political developments in the Arab world. He dissects three interrelated fields, i.e., democracy, legitimacy and social relations. The book, divided into five chapters, questions the traditional understanding of democratisation as a linear, formal and systematic process and seeks to re-evaluate the power politics of democratic transition. The author provides a historical narrative of the existing interplay of political and social factors and sectarian rivalries. Past sectarian underpinnings have transformed into current ideological contestations in different states in the Arab world. The book devotes substantial attention to the changing domestic context in Arab states that affect the regional order. It also analyses the role of Political Islam and non-state actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah to evaluate the scale of sectarianism in the region.

Authoritarianism in the Arab World

Arab authoritarianism is marked by secretiveness, policy of patronage, political management by controlling the elites and crony capitalists, manipulation of the constitution, rigged elections, welfare services, subsidies in exchange for political subordination, high

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military budgets, constant surveillance, suppression and harassment of the opposition, expansion of family wealth, etc. The author negates the western academic understanding stemming from orientalist perceptions blaming cultural and religious traditions and beliefs for the absence of democratic norms. He provides examples of democratic processes in the Arab world, such as Iraq between 1921 and 1938; Syria between 1928 and 1949; Lebanon between 1926 and 1975 and Egypt between 1923 and 1952. The author insists that proper understanding of the historical context, especially in the post-World War II period, is necessary to assess the nature of Arab statecraft and autocracy.

The autocratic political systems in the Arab world have been reinforced by colonialism and imperialism. The geographical boundaries of Arab nation-states were drawn by colonial powers without any regard for the religious, ethnic and tribal realities and distinctions, with deep political ramifications that continue to be felt even now. In the post-colonial period, the key concerns of the 'national political masters' were legitimacy and protection of acquired sovereignty, which was managed by erecting authoritarian political architectures. The autocrats were aware of the vulnerability of their domestic legitimacy as well as the threats of interventions by former colonial powers. Authoritarianism was, therefore, favoured to deter internal and external threats. Electoral democracy was associated by these leaders with western ideas that exacerbate domestic divisions.

The Arab rulers, in the background of conflict with Israel and dynamics of the Cold War, built security states in which military officials replaced the civilians in the national political sphere. The militaristic orientation accentuated centralisation and personification of authoritarianism in different Arab states. The autocrats also focussed on securing absolute control over the armed forces and removing 'disloyal' officers who could instigate coups. The military appointments often occur based on ethno-religious loyalties. Personal charisma and control over the voices of the people enable them to assert their rule. The Arab regimes have used the influence of Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in the socio-political landscape to convince the masses against democratisation. In many cases, the military has emerged as the bulwark against Islamism, forged alliances with western states and secured the loyalty of the non-Islamist sections of the population. Therefore, military regimes are posed as being more suitable for the region than democratisation which could lead to 'fundamentalist theocracy'. Egypt is a good example.

Rentier Economy, Capitalism and Authoritarianism

The availability of oil and its dominant role in the domestic economy has allowed rulers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to sustain and deepen autocracy. The author notes that there is no direct linkage between the Islamic legacy and the existing political culture in the Gulf States, which is based on petrodollars. The oil-rich Gulf States can afford low taxes from its citizens and yet undertake considerable spending, that promote patronage, buy political loyalty and facilitate the use of unregulated money on internal security, and curb political mobilisation and democratic aspirations.

By the 1980s, the social contract-based political process in several Arab states became unsustainable as neo-liberal economic policies began to be introduced. These led to privatisation of public sector firms, rise in unemployment, higher income inequality, reduction in food subsidies, labour migration to the Gulf states, etc. The demand for economic and political reforms gradually increased among the youth, leading to a large number of public gatherings, workers' and students' protests that finally culminated in the 2010-2011 Arab Spring. Social media and satellite television, especially Al Jazeera, were crucial in allowing open debates of relevant political and economic issues facing the masses in the Arab world. The outcome of the Arab Spring is still unclear and different scholars have dissected the reasons through the lens of Marxist class struggle; an understanding of failed states under the influence of globalisation and neoliberalism, and Quranic interpretations. The author argues that the 2011 Arab Spring was a rejection of the 'west-centric' understanding that Muslim masses could only be mobilised through religion. It also challenged the notion that the 'Arab Street' is violent, undemocratic and patriarchal.

The Arab Spring was directed at re-negotiating and re-defining the democratic void and challenging the political, cultural, religious, legal, tribal, ideological, social, and informational powers of the Arab autocrats. The wide gap between the state and society gave no scope for negotiation on reforming the political structure and economic upliftment of the masses.

The political turmoil in the Arab world has continued after the 2011 Arab Spring. The author has identified four trends in the political transition in the post-Arab Spring period. One, non-violent transitions in Tunisia and Egypt; two, constitutional regimes

and wider political freedoms in Morocco and Jordan; third, continued violent conflicts faced by the ruling regimes as they struggle to survive in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and four, counter-revolutionary actions by GCC states in Bahrain. The distinction among the four trends has blurred in due course. In terms of democratic aspirations, the current situation in almost all states is pessimistic.

Role of Regional Powers

The democratic aspirations that led to the Arab uprisings in several states have transformed into a regional conflict for strategic influence involving multiple actors pursuing their vested interests. The forerunners in this war of hegemony are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Egypt and the consequent competition is likely to shape the future of the region. The author characterises the Shia-Sunni division as inherently political in nature that has shaped their religious narrative, impacting current politics and strategy. For both Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Arab Spring offered an opportunity to change the status quo, shape a new strategic landscape, build a new hierarchy and tilt the balance of power to suit their interests.

In the race for regional influence, the author argues, Iran has managed to subdue Saudi Arabia's relative influence. Saudi Arabia faces challenges not only from Iran but also from aspirations derived from the Arab uprising for a new political system. It is witnessing ideological turmoil between the orthodox Wahabi ideology and liberal policies pursued by Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. For Iran, the deteriorating economic situation, internal politics and concerted efforts by the US to undermine it could slow down its regional ambitions.

Turkey along with Iran were among the first states to welcome the Arab uprising, calling it a victory of the people. Turkish leaders visited Egypt, Tunisia and Libya hoping that these states would replicate the Turkish political model. In the case of Syria, Turkey pushed for regime change. However, the situation became complicated for Ankara after the rise of the Islamic State (IS), the entry of Russia and Iran, the military assertion by Kurdish forces and domestic challenges for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Arab states are aware of Turkey's hegemonic ambitions and it has been gradually distanced. For western states, Turkey's handling of the refugee issue and dubious policies against the IS has further weakened its strategic posture.

Egypt, the largest Arab state, has witnessed a relatively peaceful political transition after the long-time autocrat Hosni Mubarak was deposed by the army in February 2011. During the brief rule of the Muslim Brotherhood led government under Mohammed Morsi, there was a foreign policy tilt towards Turkey and Iran. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, however, has since joined the Saudi-led coalition due to economic priorities and intention to participate in the US-GCC led security architecture. Egypt's policy towards Islamists and the War on Terror aligns with those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Role of Global Powers

In terms of global power politics, the Arab region is crucial due to the complex interplay of geostrategic, geopolitical and geoeconomic reasons centred on energy and the maritime choke points. Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations indicated their intention to reduce the US over-involvement in the region. However, the continuing uncertainty leading to a power vacuum in the region, Iran's growing influence, assertion by extremist groups, and the removal of several key allies have hampered the US plans to reposition its strategic presence.

Russia's military entry into Syria to dismantle the IS and preserve the Bashar al-Assad regime indicates its intention to challenge US hegemony and unilateral actions. It has also disrupted plans by Turkey and the GCC states to dominate the strategic and political discourse on Syria. Russia's entry has formulated a new strategic and political equation enabling it to entrench its influence in several Arab states, including Egypt, Libya and Sudan. The author also touches upon the roles of the former colonial powers, i.e., Britain and France in orchestrating the anti-Assad posture in Syria and the anti-Muammar Gaddafi position in Libya. In the case of Iran, Britain and France have largely sided with the US position; however, both these states favour the continuation of the 2015 nuclear deal that was dismantled by Donald Trump.

Refugee Crisis

The refugee question, particularly from Syria, has challenged the European narrative of pluralism, societal harmony, integration and assimilation. The refugee crisis revealed the vulnerability of European politics, raising debates about the concept of 'Burden of Space' and 'Burden of Sharing'. The GCC states, that have been responsible for spiralling the conflict in the post-Arab Spring societies by their support for various rebel groups,

were passive about welcoming and accommodating their fellow Arab brethren ignoring the rhetoric of Pan-Arabism and Islamic Ummah.

Israel-Palestine Dynamics

The author argues that the turmoil in the Arab world has benefitted Israel the most. After initial hiccups in terms of the loss of their key ally Hosni Mubarak and the one year rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Israel has in fact managed to forge newer alliances with several Arab states. At the same time, Palestinians are currently the most isolated due to their gradual disenchantment with Arab solidarity, internal political and security issues within Arab states, common concerns regarding Iran, and unilateral actions by the US, especially under Donald Trump. The book has posited that the ongoing wave of normalisation with Israel is reflective of political realism and pragmatism that have further weakened the Palestinian cause.

Political Islam

In terms of political Islam, the different streams, i.e., electoral, authoritarian and revolutionary, are interacting with the regional political process and compete to dominate or impose their versions, leading to a zero-sum game. The moderate Islamist and liberal parties could shift to radical blocs to compete in the shrinking space in the existing political structure. There is a high possibility of overlaps and redefinition of religious, regional and national identities. The author predicts that a security vacuum could promote the network of extremists, increase drug trade and piracy in the coming years. Moreover, the Kurdish issue, rehabilitation of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, and sectarian rifts would remain protracted problems.

The book, based on an in-depth study of the current situation, especially in the post-Arab Spring situation, concludes that in the near future, deep chaos is likely to prevail due to sectarian and ethnic rifts, the presence of non-state actors and a power vacuum. There is complete lack of cooperation among influential states and rebel forces regarding regional and global initiatives for managing and resolving conflicts. Moreover, unemployment, rising demography, uncontrolled urbanisation and the absence of much-needed economic reform are likely to intensify the restlessness among the Arab masses. Economic integration would be affected by persistent conflict. Due to the instability, security would remain the dominant priority in the region, weakening the democratic aspirations. Therefore, the possibility of implosion is considerably high due to severe

economic crisis and the absence of political and civil rights. In such a context, there could be a re-emergence of radical groups such as the IS to fill the power vacuum. The re-prioritisation of security issues and the war on terror by Arab states would again suppress the urge for political and economic reforms, democracy and freedom. The political role of the military and increase in security budgets would compromise the social security and welfare needs of the people leading to low GDP growth.

Implications for India

India does not conform with the Eurocentric terminology 'Middle East' and refers to the region as 'West Asia'. India's key concerns in the region are energy, remittances derived from the large diaspora, defence and security cooperation, etc. In terms of India's response to the Arab uprising, New Delhi has never advocated democracy promotion by outside forces and powers, and has pursued a balanced path. For India, instability in the region could pose challenges such as ensuring uninterrupted flow of energy supplies from regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The growing Shia-Sunni schism and its impact on domestic politics, the issue of radicalisation and extremism emanating from the region, and the spillover effects on Pakistan and Afghanistan would be other challenges.

The book provides a comprehensive insight into the crisis of political transition in the Arab world by identifying the nature and causes for authoritarianism that has impeded the development of democratic polity. It also provides an in-depth assessment of the Arab uprising that toppled several autocrats in some states while in others, dictators have managed to preserve their power through the use of the security forces. It explores the role of tribalism, sectarianism, internal dynamics and external forces in states that witnessed the Arab Spring, such as Syria, Libya and Yemen. The role of regional and global powers in shaping the political and security dynamics has been discussed in detail. It has analysed the process of emergence of a new Arab world marked by the rise of ideological, sectarian and tribal conflicts, which are inevitably reshaping the region and its future.

The book has covered the relevant themes extensively and identifies the pivotal states responsible for shaping the region. But it misses the significance of the rise of new forces. The UAE, for example, has forged a unique foreign policy approach that is assertive and pragmatic, and has adopted a version of Islamic modernity to shape the

political discourse in the region. The UAE's political intentions, in several instances, are separate from Saudi Arabia. However, the book, while drawing attention to Saudi Arabia's interests, overlooks UAE's approach, including its lead role in forging the Abraham Accords, reaching out to Iran and Syria, and intense engagement with the US. The UAE, despite its size, should be included in the list of West Asian states, along with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Egypt, that are engaged in a hegemonic competition. In the section on "Global Powers and the on-going conflict", the discussion is limited to the US, Russia, Britain and France. China, as the second largest economic power, has made deep inroads in the region and it is likely to influence the economic and political outcomes. The book surprisingly skips any reference to China's role in the region.

The author has done a commendable job in filling the gap in analysing the subject of authoritarianism, Arab uprising and political transition. It debunks the notion of incompatibility between Islam and democracy and capably identifies the factors hampering the political reform process. The chapter on India, especially, could help policymakers to shape the foreign policy approach towards the West Asian states. The timing of the book is opportune for an in-depth understanding of India's extended neighbourhood. The book is a must read for scholars and policymakers who are interested in Political Islam, Arab Spring, authoritarianism and West Asia.