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Is it Arab Spring 2.0?

MOBEEN JAFAR MIR

5th Floor Ali Plaza, Jinnah Avenue,
Blue Area, Islamabad.
Email: info@ipik.org
Tel No: 051-8444830
P.O.Box 3393
GPO Islamabad



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Mobeen Jafar Mir

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Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan

Abstract

The fresh wave of protests, seen by many as the New Arab Spring or Arab Spring 2.0, is engulfing the Arab world with new severity. A myriad of factors, ranging from domestic issues to regional environment, are fueling the ongoing protests in numerous Arab states, but those in Lebanon and Iraq have dominated the headlines. In Lebanon, dwindling economy, ineffective sectarian-based power sharing system, 'bad governance' and absence of accountability of 'corrupt political elite' are the primary factors giving birth to anxiety among the masses. Similarly, Iraq is also witnessing the largest-ever protests that have ever taken place in recent history. Protests in Iraq and Lebanon, which have paralyzed the machinery of the state, are not only leaderless, but are also without any viable future roadmap. The inability of ruling elite to assuage the grievances of protestors in both instances aggravated the situation. Excessive use of force by the state apparatus especially in Iraq, as well as growing external manipulation of these protests has further undermined the political stability in both countries. These demonstrations have serious implications for regional stability and could potentially reverse the gains made in the fight against Daesh and Al-Qaeda.

Introduction

Arab Spring was a series of popular protests that erupted in the spring of 2011 in the Arab world and were directed at regime change in a number of Muslim states including Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Syria, Egypt and Bahrain. Despite some significant achievements, the change in regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the real political and social goals of the movement i.e. making societies more democratic and attaining freedom of speech are yet to be realized.

Tunisia had led the way by bringing down an authoritarian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali thus paving the way for the country's first ever democratic parliamentary elections in October 2011. Inspired by the way Tunisia got rid of a dictator, who had been ruling the country with an iron fist for 20 consecutive years, several other Arab states also embarked on the same path.

A wave of protests subsequently engulfed Egypt and Bahrain. These protests also gave an impetus to anti-government forces in Yemen, Syria and Libya thus transforming the uprisings into prolonged civil wars and depriving the people of intended benefits of political liberalization in the region.

On the whole, the outcome of Arab Spring was disappointing. Instability in Egypt, for instance, continues to linger even after Hosni Mubarak's exit in 2012. A former military general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who is currently the president, continues to rule the country single-handedly. Regrettably, there are hardly any visible signs of democratic values in the Egyptian society.

Similarly, future prospects have remained bleak for the people of Libya, who had expected that an end to dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's government in October 2011 would be the dawn of political, economic and social reforms in their country. Libyan chaos has, since then, given birth to several crises, notably grave human rights violations and refugee emergency. Libya continues to remain mired in conflict with struggling economy and political reforms remaining a distant dream.

The civil war in Syria, which broke out in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, claimed up to half a million lives. The weakened government control over Syria, due to the civil war, at one moment, allowed ISIS, an ultra-extremist Islamic terrorist group also known by its Arabia acronym Daesh, to declare a caliphate in northeastern Syria, where it executed thousands of citizens. Although, President Bashar al Assad has prevailed after a long and bloody war, but there are hardly any signs of political reforms in the country.

In Bahrain, likewise, the government of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa suppressed the protests that were directed at the downfall of the present constitutional form of monarchy which, according to the majority of the people of Bahrain, has been forcefully imposed on them and limits their freedoms.

Yemen too has been devastated by the civil war there. The protests in 2011 were successful in ousting Ali Abdullah Saleh. However, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who succeeded Saleh, too failed to address the problems leading to wider discontentment among the masses. Houthi movement, which had earlier fought against Saleh, then took control of Sanaa forcing Hadi to flee the country in March 2015. Alarmed by the rise of Houthis, Saudi Arabia and several other Arab states aided by UK, US and France launched air strikes against Houthis. Over 100,000 people have died due to Saudi led strikes and the resulting humanitarian crisis. However, the coalition has failed to dislodge Houthis from Sanaa. Benefitting from the chaos in the most impoverished Arab nation, terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS have expanded their footprint there. There are no signs of peace resolution of the conflict so far although the stalemate in the war has now begun hurting Saudi Arabia.

Tunisia, the only successful example of Arab Spring-1, continues to grapple with the same problems of corruption, poor governance, poverty, and economic deprivation despite changing 9 governments in the past eight years.

There are numerous reasons behind the failure of the Arab Spring-1. In few instances like Bahrain, Morocco and even Saudi Arabia, the autocratic governments suppressed dissent and consolidated their control by giving few concessions to the people, but no real political reforms were undertaken.

Other reasons for failure of Arab Spring – 1 can be listed as:

- The transformation of popular uprisings against autocratic rule into civil war dissuaded others from seeking ‘democracy’ out of the fear of bringing war to their countries. People not only lost hope of achieving democratic rule, but a perception emerged that security and development in Arab world could only be delivered by the dictators, who had been ruling that part of the world for long. This significantly curtailed the aspirations of democracy among the people, who generally believe that their social needs are their foremost and primary concerns rather than pursuit of democratic rights. Since the Arab world is bestowed with enormous energy resources, the monarchs there lavishly provide subsidies to their masses, majority of whom prefer enjoying the handouts.

- Secondly, the Arab Spring could not succeed owing to deeply-ingrained social conservatism and religious tendencies of the Arab world. Issues like gender relations, societal norms with respect to religion, and freedom to express oneself are highly controversial in the Arab world. This attitude hinders establishment of democratic system of governance in Arab countries.
- Thirdly western powers, which claimed to champion the cause of democracy, prefer to pursue their narrow interests by aligning themselves closely with the monarchs, while ignoring their misdeeds rather than upholding democratic values.
- The most critical reason for failure of Arab Spring-1 was that the people participating in the protests neither had a central leadership nor viable plans and strategies for dealing with the post protest situation or addressing governance issues in instances where they were able to topple the governments. For instance, when Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak was brought down there was no strategy to deal with the governance vacuum that resulted. This lack of political acumen among the protestors has mired these states in a prolonged political turmoil.
- Fifth, absence of civil society institutions, or at best existence of very weak organizations, also played a significant role in failure of the Arab Spring-1. Tunisia, the only successful example of the Arab Spring-1 so far, had relatively stronger civil society institutions. A “national dialogue quartet” consisting of four national organizations, was formed which played a remarkable role in brokering talks between different political factions in Tunisia. In 2015, the Quartet received the Noble Peace Prize for its efforts at building pluralistic democracy in the country. The Quartet comprising Tunisia’s largest trade union, its business and lawyers institutions, and a human rights organization proved that if empowered, these national institutions can also play a major role in mapping out the future direction of a state. Absence of these institutions in other states descended their revolutions into an endless chaos.

Second Phase

The latest wave of protests that started in the Arab World in December last year from Sudan has hit a number of countries so far including Tunisia, Jordan, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon. Many are already describing the agitation as the New Arab Spring or Arab Spring 2.0. The issues being raised in the latest wave of protests are very much the same as the first edition of Arab Spring. People are demanding say in governance, dignity, end to corruption in their respective governments, and economic opportunities. These protests have erupted because the issues raised by the protestors earlier in Phase-1 remained unaddressed. The situation persisted since the agitation was then in some instances quashed by force, while in others the rulers were complacent and failed to realize that the patronage system that kept them in power for so long had weathered and was no more good enough to sustain them.

Two countries that hogged the headlines over past couple of months due to continuing protests are Iraq and Lebanon.

There were different triggering factors for the protests in all these countries. For instance in Sudan protests began in December 2018 because of emergency austerity measures imposed by the government to stave off economic collapse; in Tunisia due to increase in tax tariffs; Algerian protests were sparked by Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to seek re-election to the office of the president; release of videos on purported corruption of Egyptian President Sisi and those close to him set off agitation in Egypt; in Jordan the demonstrations were over teachers' salaries; while protests began in Lebanon because of new taxes and Iraq against dismissal of a counter-terrorism commander.

However, broadly two factors were at play. Domestic reasons especially economic conditions were the main instigator, but at the same time the regional environment, Iran's growing influence in the region, and relations between some of the countries and the West influenced the direction of the protests.

LEBANON

Protests in Lebanon started after the government on October 17 announced massive new taxes including a tax on use of WhatsApp. People, who felt increasingly burdened by the new taxes, were already upset over mismanagement of economy and corruption of the ruling elite. Their miseries had been compounded by shortage of electricity and water and poor waste management in cities. The new taxes thus caused the simmering anger to finally boil over.

Another motivating factor behind the protests was the growing frustration among the Lebanese with the country's sectarian confessional system, under which the president must be a Christian Maronite; the prime minister a Sunni Muslim; and a Shia as the speaker of parliament. The general perception in Lebanon is that this power sharing agreement caused dysfunction in the government and promoted sectarian leaders in the country at the cost of the state.

The protest demonstrations, therefore, initially transcended sect and class, and were held all across Lebanon.

The government then announced a number of reforms to placate the protestors, but they were unyielding and finally Prime Minister Saad Hariri tendered his resignation on Oct 29. His resignation came after one of the governing coalition partners pro-US group 'Lebanese Forces' quit the alliance to side with protesters, while another Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) threatened to pull out. Besides, these internal pressures Hariri's resignation was also prompted by his tensions with President Michel Aoun. Hariri wanted to sack Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, but Aoun and Hezbollah were resisting.

Protests have continued in the country even after Hariri's resignation. There has, meanwhile, been a transformation in the character of these protests, which initially included pro-Hezbollah elements and civil society activists, who shared the anger against 'misgovernance' and 'corrupt political elite'. Pro-Hezbollah activists separated themselves from the agitation and the protests then came to be dominated by a mix of middle and lower middle segments of society, West backed NGOs and political parties, and leftist groups. And so did the demands of the protestors change from that for a functioning government, which could deliver services to the people, to anti-Hezbollah protests.

The formation of a new government is, meanwhile, being blocked by the infighting between the mainstream parties some of whom were uneasy allies in the previous government. The situation has been further complicated by external involvement especially that of US, which is believed to be trying to exploit the situation to narrow the political space for Hezbollah or even oust it from any future government.

Former US ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman, in a testimony before US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, said: "the demonstrations and the reactions to them by Lebanese leaders and institutions fortunately coincide with U.S. interests". He maintained that "Lebanon was a venue for global strategic competition" and called on the US government to influence the outcome of the protests. Similar calls were made by some of other US think tanks, more prominently The Atlantic Council.

Lebanon's powerful banking sector too has been trying to cash in on the situation and achieve its political goals.

In short the forces that tried to exploit Arab Spring - 1 in favour of Washington have been out in force again.

IRAQ

The ongoing violent protests in Iraq's Shia dominated South, which started on Oct 1 and have so far claimed over 430 lives and left around 17,000 wounded, have thrown up serious questions about the future of the political system in Iraq.

Iraq has over the past decade witnessed several protest movements, but the current one, which has already forced Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi to step down, is more widespread and bigger in size. The level of anger among the participants is also much higher and they have been refusing to budge.

The protests are one of the first major manifestations of the anger that had been building among the masses over dysfunctional governance of the country and rampant corruption. It is the largest grass root political mobilization in Iraq ever since the fall of Saddam regime in 2003. A significant sign of attrition of public confidence in the political leadership, which was missed by

most of the analysts, was the dwindling voter turnout that had gone down from 70% in 2005 to 44.5% in 2018, when the last elections were held.

The participation in the protests has been quite diverse and is without no centralized leadership. Most of the youngsters taking part in the demonstrations are not affiliated with any of the political parties. They are mostly disenchanting youth. In the absence of central leadership, the protesters have failed to come up with a list of specific demands.

The movement initially began as a protest against the ouster of a commander of a counter-terrorism force Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, who was popular because of his role in the fight against ISIS/Daesh. But, soon the protesters turned to more pressing issues for the ordinary people i.e. provision of jobs and basic services including clean water and electricity.

Despite having enormous resources of oil, as per a report published by the World Bank, more than 60% of its 40 million of population lives on less than \$6 a day. The unemployment rate in 2018 was as high as 8%. Iraq, meanwhile, has the world's fourth largest proven-oil reserves and is also a member of Opec. It earns nearly \$80 billion per annum from exporting oil. In a sharp contrast to the pervasive poverty in the country, there is a tiny elite that has benefitted from the situation and amassed wealth. Transparency International, in 2018, ranked Iraq as the 12th most corrupt country in the world.

Soon after the start of the protests, the reasons that sparked them off went into the back drop and the atmosphere became more divisive and charged with the attacks on the offices of Popular Mobilization Units, also known as Hashd Al-Shabi, attempts on the lives of activists and security officials linked to Hashd, assassinations and lynchings. These incidents added fuel to fire and made the situation more complicated. The role of unidentified saboteurs in such actions was very critical. It's unclear on whose directions were they acting.

Moreover, the use of force by security agencies to quell protests, slow government response to the protesters' demands and then delays in delivering on those promises, and massive trust deficit with the government also caused their resentment and anger to grow.

The widespread protests soon acquired a political dimension and they began demanding overthrow of the entire system and not just the exit of the government for its dismal performance. Moreover, anti-Iran sentiment was inflamed by external elements, who were averse to Iran-Iraq security cooperation. There were also attacks on Iranian diplomatic missions in Iraq. The consulate in Najaf was attacked and torched twice.

White House in one of the statements on Nov 10, 2019 said: "Iraqis won't stand by as the Iranian regime drains their resources and uses armed groups and political allies to stop them from peacefully expressing their views."

Middle East Eye, in one of its report published on November 13, 2019, said: “Demonstrations had dimmed for a few days following a deadly crackdown by security forces in Baghdad and major southern cities, but flared again on Wednesday with demonstrations by striking students and teachers. The protests came after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said he had spoken to Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi by phone late on Tuesday and deplored the death toll among the protesters as a result of the government of Iraq's crackdown and use of lethal force.”

One of the other manifestation of this anti-Iran sentiment were the protests targeting groups like Hashd Al-Shabi that is credited with the defeat of ISIS in Iraq, but is considered close to Iran.

There could be several explanations why the protests erupted and are persisting. Some of the major reasons are:

- The issues raised by the masses in earlier agitation drives were not addressed despite pledges by the government to rectify the situation. Consequently not only the frustration of the people, burdened by tough economic conditions and absence of services, grew, but they also lost confidence in the current political lot and were not ready to listen to them anymore.
- Prime Minister Mahdi, two weeks after the start of the protests, announced a series of measures to mollify the rage like land distributions, construction of 100,000 new housing units, military enlistment, increased welfare stipends for needy families, and the creation of large market complexes, but he failed to deliver. This happened because the protesters weren't ready to trust him in view of their past experiences.
- Tenuous political environment was one of the major contributing factors as it undermined public's confidence in the political leadership of all shades. Moreover, the political make up and the patronage system between the political parties and the bureaucracy prevented any real action against corruption.
- When Prime Minister Mahdi, a technocrat, was elected as the prime minister in 2018, he had vowed to undertake reforms and check corruption, but his reliance on the political parties that were deeply hand in glove with the corrupt prevented him from delivering. He instead had to cut deals with them to sustain himself in office till he stepped down.
- The fear of ISIS had receded after the group was routed from Iraq through some effective counter-terrorism operations. This allowed people to again think about their bread and butter issues. People legitimately expected peace dividend after ISIS' defeat, but that wasn't there. Instead they found corruption among the political elite growing.
- Use of force to suppress the agitation proved counterproductive. Instead of quelling protests, it fueled resentment and anger against the government. United Nations envoy to Iraq Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert told the Security Council that Iraqi forces used live

ammunition and “non-lethal devices” like tear gas causing “horrific injuries or death”. High fatality was one of the leading factors that provided for the continuation of the protests.

- The movement was not led by any of the traditional political parties instead it was grass root campaign that lacked any organized leadership. Most of the networking was done through social media particularly WhatsApp and Facebook.
- Iraq’s clergy particularly Ayatollah Sistani, who wields considerable influence among the Iraqi Shias and had played critical role in diffusing crises in the past, endorsed the demands of the protesters and largely maintained a hands-off approach towards the demonstrations. This strategy was apparently adopted to avoid making the institution Marjayat, the central religious authority, controversial. It was only after the shrine of Sayyid Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim was attacked and its gate was set on fire that pro-clergy (pro-Marjayat) or sort of counter-rallies were held. Prime Minister Mahdi resigned after Ayatollah Sistani called for resignation of the government.
- Although, there is no denying of the underlying sources of strife in Iraq, the role of external element particularly US and some of the Arab neighbours of Iraq cannot be discounted as they tried to cash in on the public sentiment and the volatile situation there. This is because Iraq is deeply enmeshed in regional rivalries and tensions.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a day before US government ordered sanctions against four Iraqi leaders on allegations of corruption, tweeted: “Today, we’re taking action to honor the pledge to use our legal authorities to sanction corrupt Iraqis who are stealing the country's public wealth and targeting peaceful protesters. Political leaders and government officials must put #Iraq first.”

While the Western leaders conveniently cast Iran as the villain in the protests in Iraq and accuse Iraqi leaders of being corrupt, they tend to ignore America’s own role in promoting corruption within Iraq and imposing a convoluted political system in the country. US role in the misuse of funds for reconstruction of Iraq after the war are well documented. Similarly, one must not miss out that most of the elite dominating Iraq’s political scene comprises the exiles, who were flown back from Western countries after Saddam’s ouster to fill in the vacuum.

American concerns in Iraq were two fold.

- i. Firstly, it was wary of rising Iranian influence in the country. There was also a realization that President Trump’s maximum pressure policy on Iran had failed to deliver and if anything that can restrain Iran was public resentment against its involvement. It was believed that Iran could be forced to retreat from Iraq if it gets a bloody nose in these protests.

- ii. Secondly, US government was deeply worried about the growing closeness between China and Iraq. When Mr. Adel Al-Mahdi visited Beijing in September as the prime minister, he activated the “oil for reconstruction and investment” deal. This meant a greater Chinese foot print in Iraq and in particular in the energy sector. President Trump, who had in 2018 discussed the idea of seizing Iraq’s oil, complained at a press conference on Oct 27, 2019 that “Iraq discriminates against US oil companies in oil leases, after so many American lives were lost in the war”. Hence, it is no surprise that US annoyance about the Iraqi government preferring China, while also developing ties with Iran contributed to the US support for the protests.

One of the other American concerns was that Iraq was reopening one of the border crossings with Syria, which would have provided Iran a land route up to Lebanon. This meant a serious threat for Israeli security.

IMPLICATIONS/FUTURE COURSE

There are lot of similarities between the two episodes of Arab Spring. Despite being conscious of the mistakes made in the last version, the protesters are unwittingly going down the same path, whether it’s the lack of a central leadership/platform or the space given to external actors to exploit their movement.

The ongoing protests in the Middle East have already resulted in the exit of governments in a number of countries including Lebanon and Iraq, but the protests have persisted because the issues that led to these demonstrations remain unaddressed invariably in all the affected countries. This has further widened the distrust between the citizens and the State. There was already a significant level of mistrust between the two because of the failure of the governments in the past to deliver on reform promises.

The political environment in the affected countries, where the political forces, particularly those in the opposition, have failed to present a viable alternative is another reason behind the continuing volatility. The political elite has failed, in most cases, to connect with the protesters, who do not have any centralized leadership. Neither do the leaderless protesters have a plan or a vision for the future in terms of what next, after the fall of the government.

The third main reason for continued agitation is that ouster of a government was not the demand of the protesters in the countries, where these demonstrations are taking place. The protests are instead agitating against the “system”, which they believe had deprived them of economic opportunities and their basic rights. They want wholesale scale changes in the system.

The other aspect that has been quite obvious in these protests is that there haven't either been any major calls for democracy. This is understandable in case of Tunisia, which has had nine governments since the 2011 protests that led to the removal of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, but none has been successful in addressing the economic crisis and governance issues. The new government in Tunis led by President Kais Saied and Prime Minister Habib Jemli is facing the daunting challenge of finding a quick fix. Tunisia, it must be remembered, is seen as one of the exceptional successes of Arab Spring-1 as it brought about some political liberalization in the country.

Similarly, there were no calls for democracy in Iraq and Lebanon because people there believe that democracy did not deliver the promised goods and their lot remained unchanged. Therefore, it can be assumed that people are preferring demands for improvement of their own living conditions over grand notion of attaining democracy.

The prognosis for the future of the so-called Arab Spring – 2.0 isn't very good. No significant outcomes are expected in any of the countries that have been hit by this wave. This pessimism is primarily because of lack of organization and leadership of the protest demonstrations in these countries. The future would largely depend on the response of state and the resilience of the protesters.

Although it is difficult to exactly predict the future course of this wave of agitation at this point, but one aspect that is certain is that the path to recovery in countries that were rehabilitating after the fight against ISIS, especially Iraq, would be complicated and difficult and the people may not be able to enjoy the fruits of peace. These countries would also remain vulnerable to exploitation by terrorists attempting to reverse the counter-terrorism games. In some countries there is a serious threat of civil war. On the larger scale this implies instability in Middle East at the regional level.

Iraq and Lebanon are likely to face prolonged periods of political uncertainty after the unravelling of the political alliances. Forging new alliances for running the government in Lebanon and Iraq, which are run through confessional system, has historically been very difficult. Delay in forming new government would make it difficult for the reforms like those related to electoral systems to be enacted to address the grievances of the protesters.

About Author:

Mobeen Jafar Mir is a Research Officer at Islamabad Policy Institute (IPI).