

Review

## Analysis of the current democratic wave in the Arab world: Lessons and implications

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The Arab world which occupies the vast desert land of the Middle East is one of the most blessed in natural resources and with a peculiar socio-political setting distinct from the West. This oil rich region which has over the years been governed by monarchical rule witnessed an unrest that started at the end of 2010 attracting interest in the western democracies, in the middle and near eastern nations, whose instability will compel changes in western policies for the region. However, this paper, using both political economy and political culture approach, sought to extricate the dichotomy between the Arab world and the west in terms of political ideology. The central argument of this paper is that the current Arab revival is not a trend but rather a long time project designed by western powers and therefore posited that democratization should be a home grown process and the west may not be able to achieve politically in its current bid to democratize or "liberalize" the desert except it incorporates Islamic-political culture in its effort. More importantly, the west needs to carry along the Arabian government and its people for the full actualization of its interest(s) in the Middle East and desist from using 'force' on the people to accept a new form of political administration.

**Key words:** Arab spring, western liberalization, political transitions, democratic wave.

### INTRODUCTION

The political whirlwind that is sweeping across the Arab world can be regarded as the consolidation of the fourth wave of democratization process. The first wave which was the suffrage aggregation in United States of America began in 1820 and ended in 1926 with about 29 democracies as a consequence, while the triumph of Allied forces in World War II heralded the second wave. The propagation of democracy in 1974 to the Latin American nations made the third wave. Though, for every wave, there is always a link to dictators; examples are Benito Mussolini of Italy, Adolf Hitler of Germany and

Alfredo Stroessner of Paraguay among others. Franco of Spain brought the first wave to a halt while the ideological contest between capitalism and socialism brought the second wave to its end. In the mid 1970s the third wave of democratization began, continuing in force through the 1990s and 2000s with the end of the cold war (Strand, 2012; Samuel, 1991). However, the wind of the current wave that blew across the Arab world has been described as "Arab revival", "Arab awakening", "Arab Hurricane", "Arab Spring", "Arab Tsunami" or "Arab political whirlwind", and various titles have been given to

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the current political tide in Arabian peninsular. It started in Tunisia as a reaction to injustice and monumental inequality that existed in the political system but is about to consume almost all Arab countries from Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia to Bahrain. Presently in Syria the dimension has taken a violent form and there seems to be no end to the political virus.

Though, some called it a trend but there has been a long term design by European community to open up Arab's Middle East to the outside world. In the 1990s, it code-named Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the September 11 attack made it mandatory to change the name therefore, it become the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) which legalized the invasion of Iraq and Lebanon by the world powers and their allies.

However, by 2004, the G.8 group of industrialized countries comprising USA, France, Italy, Germany, Britain and Russia assumed the post of prophets of democracy and mildly or violently, democracy must be the world religion irrespective of the political culture of any country. Therefore, the name Broader, Middle East Initiative (BMEI) was adopted in June 2004 by the G.8 in Sea Island summit, Georgia.

This paper, therefore, examines the current wave in the Arab world using mixed methodology of political economy and political culture.

The paper is divided into three segments. The first segment formed the introduction, the second segment examined the current wave in the Arab world and made attempt to create a dichotomy between the Arab world and Western world. The segment also encapsulates deep historical root of the Arab world and explained the factors that accounted for the present trend. The last segment is the concluding chapter which encompasses the recommendations.

### **Arab political whirlwind: Trend or project**

Arabian states emerged as a response to Ottoman autocratic regime. It was as a result of spontaneous resentment by Arab-speaking countries to this empire in the 1916 that gave birth to Arab nationalism. The intellectuals and local chiefs backed by the British, requested for instructions in the Arabic language, greater local autonomy and protection of Arab rights within Ottoman Empire and promotion of Arab unity. This revolt instigated by external forces was the first provocative or violent reaction from Arab people against their leaders which based on false promises made by the British government to them i.e. the recognition of Palestine as a sovereign state but instead of this, British and European countries gave recognition to the Jewish homeland in Palestine (Ayyad, 1999). However, a symbolic movement of this revival was that Christians share the course of Arabs at the early stage and there was clear dichotomy between Arabism and Islamic religion. Though, majority

of the population were predominantly Muslims, there were various religious faithful which differed from Muslim, and Arabism was only used as a language thus it became the strongest and greatest weapons of nation-building; mean-while, this position does not suggest that Islamic religion has no influence on Arabism or the course of Pan-Arabism. In fact, Islamic culture had been more prominent even among non-Islamic adherents. Daniel, (1999:60) pointed out this fact when he opined that:

*Although many early champions of Arabism were Christians who stressed Arabism ethnic and secular content drew from Islam and its rapid rise can be partially attributed to its piggybacking on an existing Islamic identity. Whether Arabism and Islam were so intertwined that they were indistinguishable to the region's inhabitants is a matter of historical and scholarly dispute.*

Even if that is the case, Islam and Arabism cannot be divorced from each other, Islam and democracy is not also at parallel to each other. At least, some Islamic doctrines meet requirements of minimum democracy. There are three basic tenets of minimal democracy – constitution, participation and equity. Islam too favours these three *tenets-shura* which enjoins Islamic leaders to consult their subjects for the decision to be taken, *Ijma* which means important state policies must be arrived at consensus, the Zakat – redistributive tax which means universalism and egalitarian society is part and parcel of Islam. Nakhle, (2009:66) rightly observed:

*Even though, citizens of these Arab countries have long yearn for American style of democratization America exert great influence in fuelling the trend. Most of these countries Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Jordan are key allied of western power and they are able to use the pretext of war against terrorism to politically imprisoned the opposition political parties. They often speak in the language of democracy but resist genuine calls for political reforms. They paint all opposition – secular and Islamic with the same broad brush and either exclude them from the political process or co-opt them into acquiescence.*

Nadar (2009:41) also opined:

*The terrorist act of September 11, 2011 gave many of these regimes an excuse to silence all forms of opposition in the name of fighting terrors – and they use their anti-terrorism rhetoric to garner western support for their repressive policies.*

However, it should be noted that the missing gap between Islamic culture and Western political culture is individualism, liberalism and the guarantee of fundamental human rights. Democracy stems from Christian religion

and Christianity has its root from Judaism. Judaism is an aspect of European culture which has been able to penetrate and permeate the national political system in such a manner that no matter how prosperous and peaceful a country is, it must imbibe the culture of individualism and liberalism which entails both social and economic liberalism. It has been observed recently that economic liberalism always leads to collapse of state economy (Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal are in economic crises). This crises are labelled Euro Zone debt and can only be brought to a halt with the support of periphery resources and this might partly be accounted for reasons why G-8 were desperate to liberate Arabian economy in the name of spreading democracy. One begins to unfold the rationale behind France's distribution of fire-arms to Benghazi civilians in Libya under the pretext of protecting civilians during the Libya crises and the supply of illegal fire arms to Syrian rebels by the great powers such as USA and Britain through Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This action has led to illegal possession of arms by individuals and rebels and this also led to the attack of the American embassy in Benghazi and resulted into the death of America ambassadors and other American citizens at the consulate office. It is in this light that Russian foreign affairs minister maintained at the just concluded UN general meeting of September, 2012 that Middle East should be a zone free weapon of mass destruction if the world at large should have peace (Al-Jazeera, September 28, 2012).

It is paramount to state here that the enthronement of democracy needs no violent transition and rather democratic transition must be peaceful to achieve the set objectives of democracy. And in this line Ibrahim and Samir (2011:42) maintained;

*Sustainability or consolidation is a key concern for theoreticians of democratic transition, and is said to occur when democracy becomes the only game in town, i.e. when no significant political group seriously attempts to overthrow the democratic regime to promote domestic or international violence in order to secede from the State.*

Social liberalism always creates social vices such as gay and homosexuality which eventually create crack in the social fabrics of the society. The aftermath of the crises in Libya has been able to proof the pundits wrong that giving weaponry and psychological support to certain groups in the country is not the best option to unseat a dictatorship regime. These groups (Militant) have turned into rebels and threatened the "imposed" democratic regime. The same pattern of unseating autocratic regime in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya is also been played out in Syria.

Meanwhile, the leaders of these western powers acknowledged this inseparability of culture from political system. Obama Hussein Barrack, the present America president belittled secularists. Obama in Hashemi (2009)

maintained:

*Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King – indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history were not only motivated by faith but repeatedly used religious language to their causes. So to say that men and women should not inject their personal morality into public debate is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo tradition.*

The indivisibility of culture from politics could also be seen in Chinese and Japanese political system. Today, the two countries are the leading economy in the world and their Confucian heritage is consciously inherent in their political system. This is the main argument of conflict between Islam and the West; it is a clash of civilization. Therefore, one wonders if the clash is really a clash of enthronement of democracy in the Arab world or a war between Jihad and Mcworld. As observed by Markdish (2010: 58),

*In some of its more recent recasting, the slightly more sophisticated thesis defines the problem in terms of a fundamental contrast between the world of Jihad, the ancient forces of cultures, geography, tradition and community and commercialized "Mcworld" of high-tech consumerism and globalized presence of profit may be antagonistic but they are also inter-connected. Mcworld represents the natural culmination of a modernization process – some would call it westernization that has gone on since the Renaissance birth of modern.*

Ibrahim and Samir (2011:7) went further to buttress this point when he says "Mcworld predominates in the modernized West, symbolized by America. Its template is America, its form is style. It is about culture as a commodity appeared as ideology".

There is no controversy surrounding the fact that the current trend in the Arab world is a design manufactured by Western powers to impose their democracy on the Arab world. What is happening in today's Arab world is not democratization but rather liberalization of Arab world by Mcworld so that they will have unfiltered access to the economy at region and probably to protect the interest of Israel in the Middle East.

Larbi (2009:36) maintained that "it is not in the interest of the West, especially America for democracy to exist in the Arab region." Arab world spreading from the Gulf of Middle East up to the North of Africa consists of about twenty three countries of the world with a population of about one and half billion (1.5bn). However, as small as the population of the region, they contribute two third of the world oil reserve. In fact, with the whole world relying

on oil for survival, it behooves on the "World" at large to ensure peace and security in the region.

Heart of the world as Arab world could be referred to as an important strategic interest of the G-8 and they have to do everything possible to democratize or "liberalize" the region. A deceit nuclear war against Iraq led to invasion of a sovereign nation, collaboration with autocratic regimes in the name of fighting terrorism and today uprooting the same regimes implanted by them in the name of liberalism and human rights. Most of these now called autocratic regimes live on the support of the West when they face strong and militant opposition internally. Prior to the latest move by G-8, most of these Arab worlds were in stable economic position. Today, Arab world has been brought into ruins with action and inactions of this G-8. The invasion of Iraq has increased the spate of terrorism, Sudan has disintegrated into two states with the newest 193<sup>rd</sup> nation of South Sudan, Afghanistan has become theater of war, Libya a once buoyant economy under Gaddafi has become a market place for distribution of ammunition with Benghazi riddling in arm proliferation courtesy of France humanitarian assistance and the capital Tripoli now became a testing ground for NATO's newly acquired war ammunition. Syria crisis has developed into "war within" and this has given the whole world a rethink on how best to spread democracy. The reflection of this could be seen in the accusation and counter during the last general assembly meeting of the UN that the organization has failed.

Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Tunisia and even Saudi Arabia are not left out. For Egypt, protest has now become a tool to halt both political and economic progress of the state. On the aftermath of the political revival in Egypt, America and her allies have given millions of dollars to Egypt to revive their economy and billions will also come if they pursue liberal economic policy. For one, America's economy at home is in danger and notable European Union member states economy is in disarray too. One therefore, wonders if these countries are charity organizations or there is more to their motive.

In essence, the plan of G-8 on Arab world to install democracy may not materialize. One, the chance of Western democracy to work out in Arab world is slim partly because of deficit or lack of Western institutions to support democracy to work at home and the implication of this externally instigated Arab revival is that the whole world will continue to live in perpetual fear because of the insecurity in the Middle East. Larbi (2009:09) rightly observed:

*Wars are barbaric and therefore there is no 'good' and 'bad' barbarism. It is fundamentally flawed by the fact that great powers in the pursuit of their international policies may do things that suit their champions of human rights, and be aware of the publicity value of doing so, but is, quite incidental to their purpose, which if they think it necessary, are today pursued with the ruthless barbarism that heritage of the twentieth century.*

The fight may not between Muslim and G-8, the fight is between G-8 and their sponsored autocratic regimes. Hossein Mubarak, former president of Egypt banned Muslim brotherhood from participating in politics; today the ban has been lifted; brotherhood are now in control of government. In other Arab countries too, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, it has always been the case of denying Muslims their Islamic rights. Democratization is not a one-way traffic and as such it should not be Eurocentric, if meaningful and world global human right is to be achieved.

Linz and Stephan in Ibrahim and Samir (2011:120) state six conditions needed for a democracy to be consolidated:

*An authoritative state, a lively civil society, an autonomous political society, the prevalence of the rule of law, an effective state bureaucracy and an institutionalized economic society.*

## Conclusion

The paper therefore argued that much of what is inherent in democracy is not antithetical to Arab world or Islamic ideology such as consultation, participation, equality and egalitarian society. More importantly the current political whirlwind blowing across the Arab region was majorly externally-motivated by G-8 who disguisedly preach and proclaim liberalism to the Arab world, though, there have been grumbling and reactions internally such as alienation of a particular tribe or sect from participation in government, economic and social-political injustice.

The bottom line of the paper is that the current wave in Arabian peninsular is not democratization but rather liberation process engineered by G-8 group with collaboration of certain internal elements to capture Arab region for economic exploitation and political reasons. One wonder, the use of gun in promoting democracy in the Arab region. The region that is known for relative economic stability has been thrown into turmoil by G-8 through their destructive tool of NATO and the implication of this external engineered liberation and destruction of both human and material resources in this region will not augur well for the whole world whose peace is germane to the world peace and security. What Arab world need is not external engineered liberalism but rather an authority whom will be drawn from people and accountable to the people on their home grown political culture. After all, China a world leading economy today groomed its political system from her Confucian ideology. The current project of G-8 in Arab region is the reminiscence of gunboat democracy and it may not achieve much in terms of planting real democracy in the Arab world but what the West need to do is to provide and maintain democratic institutions in these countries and allow the Arabian people to see the benefit of democracy and thereby adopt it willingly.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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