

## **Arab Uprising and Its Impact**

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The Arab Spring has been one of the most valiant movements to sweep the Middle East for the past few decades, demonstrating the people's capacity to voice their discontent with authoritarian rule and governments that had largely remained impervious to representative governance, transparency, and accountability for their citizens. Beginning in Tunisia and culminating in Egypt's Tahrir Square, mass protests and revolutions have come to define the region and its politics since February 2011. While the revolutions and mass protests have ousted some of the region's longstanding dictators as seen in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, the implications of the uprisings on other regional powers, in particular, the Gulf countries, have been complicated and overshadowed by geopolitical and geostrategic interests of both regional and international powers. Six Arab countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen, have experienced various levels of critical unrest, which for many continues to this day. Political scientists Elham Fakhro and Emile Hokayem have ascribed the emergence of such civil unrest to the significant furtherance of 'individual empowerment and collective action', which has in turn strengthened civil society and its relationship to government.<sup>1</sup> The Arab Nations was generally judged to be politically stable and the events of the Arab Spring widely surprised academics that had failed to predict or anticipate potential regional unrest. This was due largely to the strength of the military-security complex and continued authoritarian dominance of the heads of state, many of which had adopted effective techniques of coercion, cooption and containment. The uprisings were spontaneous, the lack of international collusion and the dominance of 'indigenous economic, political, and social factors whose dynamics are extremely hard to forecast' created an unpredictable climate.<sup>2</sup> The protests were not fuelled by ideology but were driven by socio-economic grievances and political frustrations. The protests were not fuelled by ideology but were driven by socio-economic grievances and political frustrations. The Tunisian uprising emerged from indigent rural areas mobilised through labour movements targeting social hierarchies. Conversely, Egyptian unrest centred on demands for political reform and was fuelled by disaffected urban youth, a far cry from the armed rebels who instigated the violent uprisings in Libya, which eventually led to UN diplomatic and military intervention.<sup>3</sup> The importance of country-

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specific contexts highlights the 'national pride and the notable sovereign identity of the citizens that revolted'.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear the Arab Spring was not a unified revolution but a series of national uprisings in response to regional intranational socio-economic grievances. Less than one-third of Arab League member states experienced significant unrest, undermining claims that the events constituted a regional rebellion. The events were driven by sovereign concerns and did not reflect a pan-Arab or Muslim character; in fact the uprisings were devoid of any overarching ideology specific rather to domestic grievances. Regional economic troubles were however entrenched by the Middle East's peripheral integration into the globalised economy. The uprisings were not predominantly a product of globalisation itself but a manifestation of the resulting rise in inequalities mishandled by sovereign powers.<sup>5</sup>

Arab Spring have led to a fundamental realignment of the relationship between the citizen and the state in the GCC Countries (Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman), holding once politically immune leaders responsible for citizens' needs. For Arabs, theirs is a struggle for social justice and personal freedoms. Though many of these protests have been borne out of economic grievances, calls on the street have persistently demanded political reform, particularly more representative systems of government. Meanwhile, in the Gulf States, pressure is also mounting to redefine the social contract between ruler and ruled. These nations have long been impervious to popular demands, as they have managed to quell unrest by distributing their massive oil wealth to their citizenry. Though some Gulf states have embarked on political reform, the overall response to the Arab Awakenings has been economic, with rulers attempting to expand the rentier system by granting additional financial benefits to citizens. Yet calls for political reform persist.<sup>6</sup> In the era of globalization, information and communication technologies has worked as a vehicle for institutionalising and consolidating democratic practices in the GCC States.<sup>7</sup> The ability to communicate freely with the outside world is having a variety of effects on the views of the people, reinforcing some and changing others. The high-speed flow of information and the constant exposure to different cultures and belief systems is reshaping the opinion, values, concepts, and perceptions of citizens in formerly closed societies. At the same time it is important, Arab Gulf states are losing one of the most effective instruments of authoritarian rule: control over the flow of information.

The global wave of democratization is helping the process of opening up Arab polities, as is the prominent role being played by international and Arab human rights advocates such as Amnesty International, Middle East Watch, and the Arab Organization for Human Rights. These organizations are making it more and more difficult for Arab elites to draw upon their traditional coercive impulse and apparatus. Economic globalization and technological change (including, variously, such things as fax machines, television satellite dishes, and the global computer Internet) are generally held to have accelerated this process by breaking down international barriers, loosening the authoritarian grips of governments over the free flow of information, and empowering grassroots democratic activists. Among them are steady, even if modest, economic development, and a greater measure of social equity. Without these, the roads to democracy will be quiet rocky and reversals likely.

The Arab revolution contagion reached the shores of the Gulf, when protests took place

against authoritarian rule, rising inflation and high unemployment in Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries did not experience the scale of protests seen in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen.<sup>8</sup> The ‘Arab Spring’ has generated reformist pressures and divergent regime responses within the Gulf monarchies. Although the recent pro-democracy movement across the Arab world by all account is home-grown, the external factors and forces such as the globalization trend, the development of information and communication technology, the democratic discourse, unleashed played no small role in creating conditions for such popular upsurge across the Arab world. Following the over through Tunisian and Egyptian president the movement has already triggered mass protest even in the GCC States, notably Bahrain in February 2011.<sup>9</sup>

### **Protests in Oman:**

The anti-government sentiment in Oman, however, differs from the rest of the region’s turmoil, as there has been much less violence and more support for the country’s leader. Inspired by the recent revolutions, Protests have taken place in the Gulf sultanate of Oman, following a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations across the Arab world. About 200 protesters marched on 17 January 2011 demanding salary increases and lower costs of living.<sup>10</sup> On next day 18 January 350 people marched, demanding an end to corruption and better distribution of oil revenue. As is customary in Oman, the marchers wore traditional dress. Protesters carried signs that read, “No to Expensive Prices, No to Corruption,” “Where Is Democracy?” and “Wasta [Cronyism] Kills Competence.”<sup>11</sup> Protesters demanded cabinet ministers not serve more than four years. “The cabinet must be appointed from the Shura Council because the members are elected. We can’t have ministers serving 10 to 20 years. It is encouraging corruption,” said one protester.<sup>12</sup> Unlike protests in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia and Bahrain, the Oman demonstrations have so far been peaceful. Demonstrators carried signs with slogans of support for Oman’s Sultan Qaboos, but asked for reforms, including lower prices and better pay.<sup>13</sup> On 20 February 2011, protesters welcomed a move by the government to increase the minimum wage. The wage increases targets Omani workers in the private sector. A cabinet reshuffle has also seen the replacement of six ministers - though long-serving ministers were not affected.

Even as the government announced some measures to ease citizens’ hardships in response to recent peaceful protests. On 26 February 2011, nearly 500 protesters gathered around a shopping mall in the industrial city of Sohar they stopped traffic and shoppers around the mall premises. The shops in the area including the mall remained closed on 27 February as well.<sup>14</sup> Two people have been reported killed in clashes between security forces and protesters. On 28 February, protesters looted and burned a hypermarket in Sohar.<sup>15</sup> On 1 March 2011 protests continued for a fourth day as crowds in Sohar congregated at the Globe Roundabout. Eventually, the Omani Army in tanks peacefully dispersed protesters blocking the Sohar port and cleared them from the main coastal highway linking Muscat to Sohar.<sup>16</sup> The army issued a red alert to vacate the area or threatened action. Some people had organised community-policing groups to prevent more damage. The ‘Sohar Citizen Committee’ as its called has started giving out numbers of its core members to people who can call upon it in case of an emergency or riots attack.<sup>17</sup>

In Oman, political changes were announced in response to a spate of protests that began in early February. Among the most significant reforms were granting the consultative Council (Majlis) of Oman legislative and audit powers, in addition to restructuring the Council of Ministers through an extensive reshuffle. In addition, Sultan Qaboos created a new body to manage the country's economy and promised 50,000 additional jobs for citizens, which will cost over \$1.3 billion in 2011 alone. However, Qaboos, an absolute monarch who has ruled since 1970, has not taken any steps to grant powers for even low-levels of political activism in the Sultanate.<sup>18</sup>

While the region's poorer countries are facing immediate fiscal crises, the challenges faced by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are longer term. Issues such as rising domestic energy consumption, youth unemployment, labour reform and housing shortages have been made more complex because of the uprisings. The uprisings have also made necessary reforms in the labour market, energy subsidies and resource allocation much more politically sensitive. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the government has attempted to pre-empt any domestic uprising by increasing public sector employment and spending on housing. However, there has been insufficient long-term thinking on how to address key structural issues.<sup>19</sup>

Most regimes now are attempting to shield their countries from spreading social discontent via a classic buying-off strategy. King Abdallah in Saudi Arabia earmarked \$35 billion to placate potential dissent in Saudi Arabia. In Bahrain and Kuwait, there are similar subsidy efforts. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole is working on a sort of Marshall Plan package to buttress the regimes of Bahrain and Oman. The real question is whether these measures are sufficient to promote long-term stability and development or whether they are simply a rearrangement. In 2011 alone, the GCC nations have committed to spending a whopping \$160 billion in payouts, yet it remains to be seen whether this approach is sustainable. While such payouts are currently possible with high oil prices, new Iraqi and Libyan oil will likely stabilise prices, raising questions as to how long Gulf States will be able to sustain such spending.

After all, the Gulf has a long history of enacting political reforms that are actually cosmetic in nature and do little to implement real accountability and popular participation. Another tactic that the Gulf regimes have employed to distract attention from the domestic roots of their countries' unrest has been to hype the Iran threat.<sup>20</sup> They want the United States' focus to be primarily on Iran and not on the regimes' domestic political affairs. But the real fear in the region is of constitutionalism. Monarchies are afraid of a slippery slope of reform that ultimately results in the crown's demise. Despite the fact that the beginning of the Arab Spring came largely as a surprise for much of the international community, it is indeed true that an analysis of the economic, environmental, political, and social challenges faced by the Arab Gulf nations leads to the understanding that the revolutions were the result of a long-standing and deep state of regional crisis.<sup>21</sup>

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