

## **International Seminar**

**On**

### **Interpreting the Arab Spring**

*Significance of the New Arab Awakening*

*Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies,*

*Kolkata*

The Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies will be convening an International Seminar on West Asia from Thursday, 16 February, 2012 to Friday, 17 February, 2012.

The seminar will deal with i) an examination of the Arab upheaval ii) its implications for the region and iii) the consequent challenges it poses in the realm of policy making on West Asia.

Peaceful protests and demonstrations have swept through the Arab world, toppling rulers and advancing programs of radical change. For some enthusiasts these movements entail a revolution. They envisage a new Middle Eastern (West Asian) political and economic order. A generation of young people—men and women, using their skills in cyberspace communication and fueled by many frustrations—assembled in vast numbers in peaceful protests that have thus claimed many triumphs. They forced the departures of the long-standing rulers of Egypt and Tunisia and have demanded the monarchs of Jordan, Morocco and Bahrain reign rather than rule. (Tignor, 2011)

The entire episode began (17<sup>th</sup> December 2010) with the desperate act of self-immolation by a young Tunisian man. His death sparked a wave of rage against poverty, social exclusion, and corruption. Almost overnight, young men and women created spaces in squares, streets and alleys where one could imagine new Arab countries. Enraged, yet nonviolent, they used technology and the vocabulary of democracy to connect and mobilize ordinary Arab citizens of all walks of life and capture the attention of the world. In Egypt, the Tahrir Square became

the epicenter of the people's demands for bread, dignity and social justice. Without leaders or a timetable, but with unconditional demands for immediate change, online activists provided the physical and social grounds to imagine a new country. (Naquib, 2011) This wave of unrest across the Arab world subsequently came to be referred to as the “**Arab Spring**.”

The speed, spread and democratic thrust of Arab revolutionary uprisings conjure the revolutionary waves of 1848 and 1889 in Europe. Spearheaded by educated youth, the Arab uprisings have been brought to fruition by the masses of ordinary people who have mobilized at an astonishing scale against authoritarian regimes in pursuit of social justice, democratic governance and dignity. If this broad observation is valid, then this social upheaval is likely to unsettle some of the most enduring perspectives on the region, such as “Middle East exceptionalism” with its culturalist focus informed by assumptions of “stagnant culture,” “fatalist Muslims,” and “unchangeable polity.” The notions of “regime stability” and the “authoritarian resiliency” of the Arab states may also require reevaluation. The analytical relevance of the concept of “rentier state” as the political basis of authoritarian stability might likewise need serious reformulation. (Bayat, 2011)

The revolts sweeping the Arab world in early 2011 have been characterized as uprisings against neo liberal economic policies as well as authoritarian rule. While there is widespread agreement on the political dimension of the revolts, there has been some confusion regarding the role played by economic grievances. (Dahl, 2011) In trying to understand the complex causes of this year's wave of unrest across the Arab world, people sometimes ask whether the real drivers were economic, rather than political. Unemployment is among the protestor's key grievances, as job creation has struggled to keep up with the region's famously fast population growth, and there has been a chronic mismatch between the education that is provided and the skills that the job market needs. So is the Arab Spring really about democracy and rights, or jobs, bread and housing? The dichotomy between politics and economics is misconceived especially in a region where the state still plays a major role in almost every economy. The economies of the Arab world are fundamentally shaped by the region's political, social and institutional structures and economic problems such as unemployment, inflation and inequality are inextricably bound up with the political context. This is reflected in the demands for both political and economic rights which found resonance in the widely chanted protests slogan, “bread and dignity.” Another recurring word in protest slogans across the region has been “justice”, encompassing concerns about corruption and wealth distribution as well as human rights and the rule of law. (Kinninmont, 2011)

One of the fascinating aspects of the Arab ferment is both the commonality and the differences in the revolts. At one level there is a common pool, a common theme, a common source of all of the unrest across the region. There are also very important differences in each of these countries because while that anger and that frustration is common to each, its manifestation is very different in each of these countries. In some it taps into social cleavages, in others to ethnic cleavages, religious cleavages or even geographical cleavages. As a result, each of these different revolts, all of the unrest across the region, has a similar character to it because of these underlying common sources, but also has its unique common features. It would be enriching to understand where each of these is going as well as where the region is going overall to comprehend both the sense of commonality and those common origins, but also to appreciate the specific differences. (Pollack, 2011)

In summation, the Arab tumult has thus far witnessed revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. It has seen a civil war in Libya, social and political turmoil in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen. There has been major protests in Israel, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman and minor ones in Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Western Sahara. The voices of dissent have adopted common techniques of civil resistance in persistent campaigns involving strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies, as well as the use of social media to systematize, communicate, and intensify awareness in the face of state endeavours at subjugation and internet censorship. The unique and unprecedented character of the civilian protests in the Arab world have led to uncharted political grounds following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, an intimidating Libyan leadership transition, and a Syrian regime engaged in a brutal crackdown on dissidents. The seminar intends to look into the perilous nature of the change as it unfolds in the current phase of the Arab Spring and provide perspectives on the shifting landscape of a turbulent region as well as the implications of the turmoil both in the regional and global sense.

The seminar aims at exploring the following themes:

- Ramifications of the Arab Spring: Changing perceptions of the region and its people.
- The Arab Street and the Politics of Dissent.
- The Geo-political significance of the Arab Spring.
- The Economics of the Arab Upheaval.
- The Arab Spring and the Israel-Palestine Conflict.

- The Arab Ferment and its implications for the United States.
- The Arab Uprising: Challenges for India's West Asia policy

The travel costs (economy class airfare) of the participants from Asia will be covered by the organisers. The Institute will be providing local hospitality for the duration of the conference. The proceedings of the conference will be subsequently published as a book. Participants are requested to respond within December 20, 2011 with a title, 500 words abstract and a brief one page CV to

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