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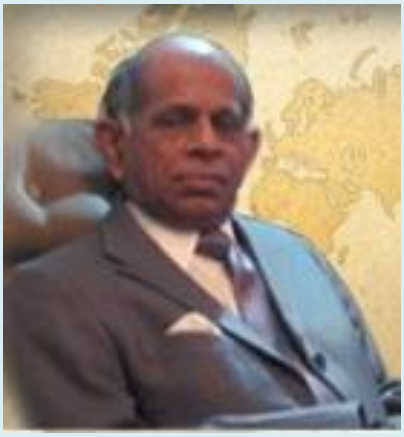
ARAB UPRISINGS: RESPONSE OF THE GULF COUNTRIES

BY



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It is obvious that the six GCC monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain) have addressed the threat to the status-quo, arising from the Arab Uprising, far more adroitly than the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, which fell one by one in a space of thirteen months starting from January 2011. However, it should be pointed out that the threat to the status-quo in the GCC was severe only in Bahrain. The common thread running through the uprisings in different countries, where the regimes fell, can be summed up as a demand for 'bread, dignity, and justice'. The GCC nationals are not suffering from poverty, but their demand is primarily for dignity and justice. Some of them, though not necessarily the majority, want to be citizens rather than subjects.

What Happened in GCC Countries?

The Arab Uprising impacted on GCC countries differently. There was hardly any protest in Qatar, online or offline. There have been sporadic protests in Saudi Arabia, the farthest from democracy within the group. Saudi Arabia has successfully applied, in reverse, the dictum of no taxation without representation. It represents the best success of Political Islam, if defined as an attempt to subordinate politics to Islamic teachings. On 23 January 2011, a 65-year old man immolated himself in Samitah in the south-western region close to Yemen but there was hardly any impact. There were street protests, though unrelated to the self-immolation. The authorities made arrests and successfully intimidated the protestors. The Shias in the east tried to organize a 'day of rage' on 11 March 2011 through face book, but it was more or less suppressed by security forces. Protests have not ceased, but they have not acquired any momentum to threaten the regime. They are not likely to acquire such momentum in the foreseeable future.

King Abdullah announced a package of $130 billion, an amount in excess of the total budget of 2007, that included 60,000 more jobs in the Ministry of the Interior, that already employs as many as the entire private sector, and 500,000 new houses. The royal family is divided on how to address the protests. The King is 90 and his successor will have to take some crucial decisions.

Bahrain faced a serious threat to the ruler mainly because the Shias (66%) have been politically discriminated. They staged large demonstrations and were joined by others, too. Saudi

Arabia took the lead, arranging for a request from Bahrain to the GCC to send military forces to put down the unrest. A force of 1500, consisting of troops from Saudi Arabia and UAE, crossed the King Fahd Causeway, connecting the two countries, in March 2011 and the uprising was crushed, though it continues to simmer.

Oman witnessed protests against corruption and lack of jobs and Sultan Qaboos, in power since 1970, dismissed some ministers, took strong action against corrupt officials and has more or less brought the situation under control. He refused to accept the $10 billion that GCC offered him. There is hardly any serious demand for the Sultan to leave. He is a bachelor without any heir. It is believed that he has left a sealed cover to be opened, if, within three days of his demise, the royal council appointed by him fails to designate a successor. This arrangement could prove to be risky.

UAE did not witness street protests, but there were significant online protests. About 130 Emiratis signed up on a petition to the UAE President demanding a constitutional monarchy. Many of them were arrested and seven were deprived of their nationality.

Kuwait has made more progress towards democracy than others in the GCC. Technically, it is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, with women also voting. The political turmoil in Kuwait is not linked to Arab Uprising. Kuwait has witnessed massive protests including the storming of the Parliament by protestors asking for the resignation of the Prime Minister.

GCC Response to the Uprising

It is Saudi Arabia and Qatar that have been most active. The rest of the GCC has followed willy-nilly. Saudi Arabia did not make any statement in support of Ben Ali, when the Tunisian people demanded his resignation. But, he was given asylum in Jeddah when he fled Tunisia. When President Hosni Mubarak faced demands to resign and US sent out signals asking him to step down, Saudi Arabia was upset and promised to make good any withdrawal of US aid. Saudi Arabia supported the Egyptian Army when it took over power from Mubarak and was upset when Muhammad Morsi of Muslim Brotherhood got elected as President. It worked with the Egyptian Army to bring down Morsi. President Al Sisi has the strong support of Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and UAE have promised $12 billion aid in 2013. Egypt refused an offer of $2 billion from Qatar.

In case of Libya, the GCC took the lead in mobilizing the Arab League to ask the Security Council to take action, resulting in Resolution 1973, which the West suitably stretched to justify the NATO bombing that toppled Gaddafi. He had alienated fellow Arab rulers by insulting them in public and Saudi Arabia believes that he had tried to assassinate King Abdullah.

In case of Syria, the GCC has generally supported the rebels against President Basher al Assad, primarily because he is supported by Iran. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are supporting rival factions.

Internal Rift within GCC

The Arab Uprising has exposed the internal rift within the GCC. Saudi Arabia has tried to expand the GCC by inducting Jordan and Morocco, but failed as others opposed the expansion. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE withdrew ambassadors from Qatar. A plan by Saudi Arabia to convert GCC into a union has been stalled, as Oman threatened to withdraw from the GCC.

Saudi Arabia's Search for Security

Saudi Arabia was appalled that US did not support Mubarak. The Saudis are less certain of continued US support should the regime face serious threat to its survival. It has sought military support from Pakistan which has responded favorably. Pakistan has agreed to provide troops to be deployed along the border with Yemen and even in case of internal disturbance. Bahrain recruited retired military officers from Pakistan as the regime faced the threat from protestors. Pakistan has improved its status as a security provider to the Gulf regimes.

The Future

The threat to the regime in Bahrain can become serious if Iran extends serious support to the Shias. The Saudi plan to confront Iran is not getting much support from within the GCC. Oman has always opposed any such confrontation. Oman facilitated talks between US and Iran

on the nuclear issue. While an invitation extended by the Saudi foreign minister to his Iranian counterpart is still hanging in the air, others, except Bahrain, have exchanged high level visits with Iran. It was only in 1970 that Iran stopped airing publicly its claim on Bahrain.

While there is no imminent threat to the status-quo in the GCC countries, should Iran choose to lend support to the rebels, the survival of the regime in Bahrain cannot be guaranteed and if that regime falls the repercussions could be felt across the King Fahd Causeway.

The GCC has a total population of 43 million of which foreigners, mainly workers, account for 43%. The top six manpower exporters are India, Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. The amount sent to India alone is $25 billion (2012-2013). The GCC is a significant provider of hydrocarbon energy to India and other countries. Any serious political turmoil will affect India and other countries adversely. Political stability is in the interest of all. What is required is a peaceful and rapid progress towards a system of constitutional monarchy. There is no real threat to the monarchical system, provided the monarchs are willing and able to move with the times.

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(The author is a former Indian Ambassador who specializes in West Asian affairs.)