

Is revolution possible in a Shellfare society?

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The ongoing Arab revolution may not, after all, rain on the Gulf region the way it has in Egypt and Tunisia. The clouds are hanging heavy all right on at least two of them -- Bahrain and Kuwait; but most likely, the torrent currently lashing Libya will pass over the oil-rich Gulf. Not because its political soil is not ready for a violent downpour, but because the Gulf, unlike its behemoth neighbours, has a different political and economic rationale.

The Arab world is broadly divided into two political spheres: The Republican and the Monarchical. The countries abbreviated as MENA (Middle East and North Africa) are largely Republican while the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) has most of the monarchies in the world.

Republican Arabia is where democracy has been periodically used by the feudal class and military dictators as a convenient tool to promote their individual and class interests. Democracy, as is known in the western world, has never been practised in this part with any degree of commitment. It has always been used, at best, as a deodorant to dispel the miasma of political decadence. The region that includes Egypt, Syria, Libya, Sudan, Iraq, etc., is also weak in economy and bulk in demography. But they are a people with rich history and grand civilizations that grew up along mighty rivers.

The republican Arab is as politically aspiring as he is economically deprived and yet, as irony would have it, his political aspirations seldom found fruition, while his economic depravity always stayed with him. Consequently, periodic upheavals against his usurpers became part of his growing up.

The monarchical Arab, on the other hand, is less complicated about his lineage. He is not a fundamental democrat who would die or kill for his voting right. In fact, he could be boasting about his explicit preference for a good material life in return for a barren political existence. He believes that political will is not as critical as two square meals and that both are best taken care of by his emir who, with a divine right to rule, can never rule wrong.

The stirrings in Bahrain and Kuwait, both monarchies, may have been tagged along with the ongoing pan-Arab political revolution. But in reality, they have little to do with their people's democratic yearnings and, instead, are rooted in local compulsions. In Bahrain, it's essentially an outpouring of the majority Shia's sectarian resentment against an entrenched Sunni monarchy, while in Kuwait the long-drawn power struggle among the ruling class has often taken on the colours of a democratic struggle, which once or twice had even boiled over into feeble coup attempts in the past. In other words, while the average republican Arab is fighting to reclaim his democratic soul, the Bahrainis and the Kuwaitis are engaged in a power struggle with their ruling families.

For the GCC Arab, democracy is not a sine qua non for economic growth, political stability and social progress. The more aggressive among them would actually dub it as a Western fad thrust upon their tribal traditions. And the argument is not wholly without substance.

While pro-democracy economists argue in chorus that democracies, on average, enjoy the highest economic growth in the world, GCC apologists riposte that most of the carbon monarchies have economies far exceeding some of the world's most developed democracies, including the US and Japan.

Victor Menaldo, professor of Political Science at the University of Washington, Seattle, is a staunch defender of the monarchist virtues. In a recent study, discreetly drummed up by the GCC official media, Menaldo argues that in the case of GCC's oil-fuelled political economies, where the people's needs are not only satisfied but surpassed, even political stability is promoted in the long run, as they are "less likely to experience coups, revolutions, or government crises".

The study even claims that increased oil revenues in the GCC can only be used expeditiously by the economies ruled by monarchs and not by republics.

Menaldo's study tries to explain why the monarchical political culture is "widely misrepresented and misunderstood by the Western world". It blames it all on the Western foreign policy, the cornerstone of which is a fallacy that all autocrats are predatory.

In order to prove that non-democratic GCC governments are successful in achieving a relatively peaceful political climate, prosperous financial system and social harmony, Menaldo points out that all but two (Bahrain and Oman) of the six GCC countries account for over 60 percent of the world's proven energy reserves and, according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, energy revenues represent about 50 percent of their GDPs.

The burden of Menaldo's argument is that democracy can deliver politically and economically only when it is practised legitimately and honestly and that most of the world's democracies have failed this fairness index test. He quotes a 2008 report published by the Cato Institute, the Washington-based public policy institution, to buttress his argument that most democracies failed because they are all imported and not native in their soul and spirit.

For every West Germany or Japan, the Cato Institute report points out a Cuba, Haiti, Somalia and Vietnam as examples of imported and therefore failed democracies. Closer home are Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Sudan.

Native or outlandish, Menaldo and the hydrocarbon emirates of the Gulf would have us believe that democracy is best secured and taken care of in a Shellfare society (fuelled by Western oil cartels) rather than in a democracy that (falsely) promises an egalitarian welfare society.

However, the critical question is: What happens when the ground beneath is depleted of hydrocarbon? Until that question is answered, the Shellfare argument will have a certain staying power.

(27.03.2011 - P.P. Balachandran was a senior editor with Qatar-based Al Jazeera Channel. He can be contacted at balacnambiar@gmail.com)