

Developments in the Maldives and India's options

A.K. BANERJEE

THE sudden resignation of President Nasheed in Maldives on February 7 took many by surprise. The media in India reported it as a coup, a military takeover, the President was forced out, etc. Nasheed's description of the change as a coup gave it a particular flavour. India is allergic to coups in its neighbourhood. It has had to get used to them in Pakistan and is wary of them in Bangladesh. This reflex is rooted in its deep seated commitment to democracy with a supreme civilian authority. Coups also imply surprises and India does not particularly care for them. In the instant case the association of the word coup with Maldives set off a reflex and a chain reaction set in thereafter. India remembered the coup attempted in Maldives in 1988 when it had to rush its forces there to restore the government's authority. An implied threat to its own security from an unstable situation in Maldives caused the Government to take the line of least resistance i.e., accept the newly sworn in President, Dr. Waheed and assure him support and treat the matter as an internal issue of Maldives, to be sorted out by them. Overall, the message that went out of New Delhi was that while it cannot be unconcerned about happenings in that country, it is prepared to work with whoever is legitimately in power there. However, the issue of legitimacy has now come to the fore and

many feel that this needs to be looked at closely. Also, by being the first country to accept the developments there as an internal matter, India set an example for others to follow [witness the US position].

"Arab Spring" may have started in Tunisia in 2011 but the movement for democratic governance that this implies came to Maldives a good decade and half earlier. In keeping with the gentle nature of the people of these idyllic isles situated in close proximity to India, the movement for democracy finally led to political reforms, formation of political parties with their manifestos and eventually free elections that ushered in the government led by Nasheed. The erstwhile President Gayoom who had been in office for three decades and for whose protection India had rushed its troops and ships in 1988 was voted out of office and went gracefully. Nasheed had been in power for slightly over three years and elections are due next year. [Incidentally, the word Maldives is an anglicized rendition of the word "mala dweep", a word of Sanskrit root meaning a garland of islands -- an apt description of the cluster of archipelagos that make up the country.]

Democracies are however notoriously unstable to begin with and need patience and commitment all round. Maldives is no different and its institutions have not worked properly so far. The President was getting increasingly frustrated and the opposition confronted him at every step.



Maldives' new President Mohammed Waheed is indeed in a worried situation.

Nasheed, long used to agitating for change and clamouring for power, did not, it seems, grow in office and his style was quite un-presidential. One could say that he was being democratic and had the zeal of a reformer. But holding office and leading street demonstrations require different hats.

Nasheed and his supporters faced opposition from a rich business class which controlled the mainstay of the Maldivian economy, i.e., the tourism industry. The downturn in the European economies, which

sends the bulk of tourists to Maldives, has negatively affected this sector, which, in turn, impacted on the domestic political dynamics.

In describing his ouster as a coup, perhaps Nasheed wanted to indirectly involve India which he felt he was justified in doing given his attempts to bring the two countries closer, apart from his genuine democratic credentials. Yet at the same time he did not want armed conflict in his country or a civil war like situation. Since his ouster

he has been loudly proclaiming his democratic credentials and wants India to hear him. He has repeated that he handed over power under duress and as a democrat he hopes India will see his position and, literally, rescue him. Not only that, he wants to bring forward elections to challenge the opposition and test their legitimacy at the hustings.

What should India do? Having made the point that Maldives is a major security issue for us and bearing in mind the overall international scenario prevailing now, we should bat for a friend. Knowing how slippery the democratic playfield can be and having a sense of who actually has fouled, as a sort of friendly referee, we should award a free kick to the player who has been knocked down. How can we do that? We should work for a unitary government and persuade all to agree to early elections. But since there are no free lunches, we should recommend that Maldivians agree to long term strengthening of democratic institutions and resolve their differences peacefully; different factions must talk to each other and work towards a modus vivendi. Above all, authorities in Maldives must be encouraged to respect human rights and avoid use of force to deal with political dissent.

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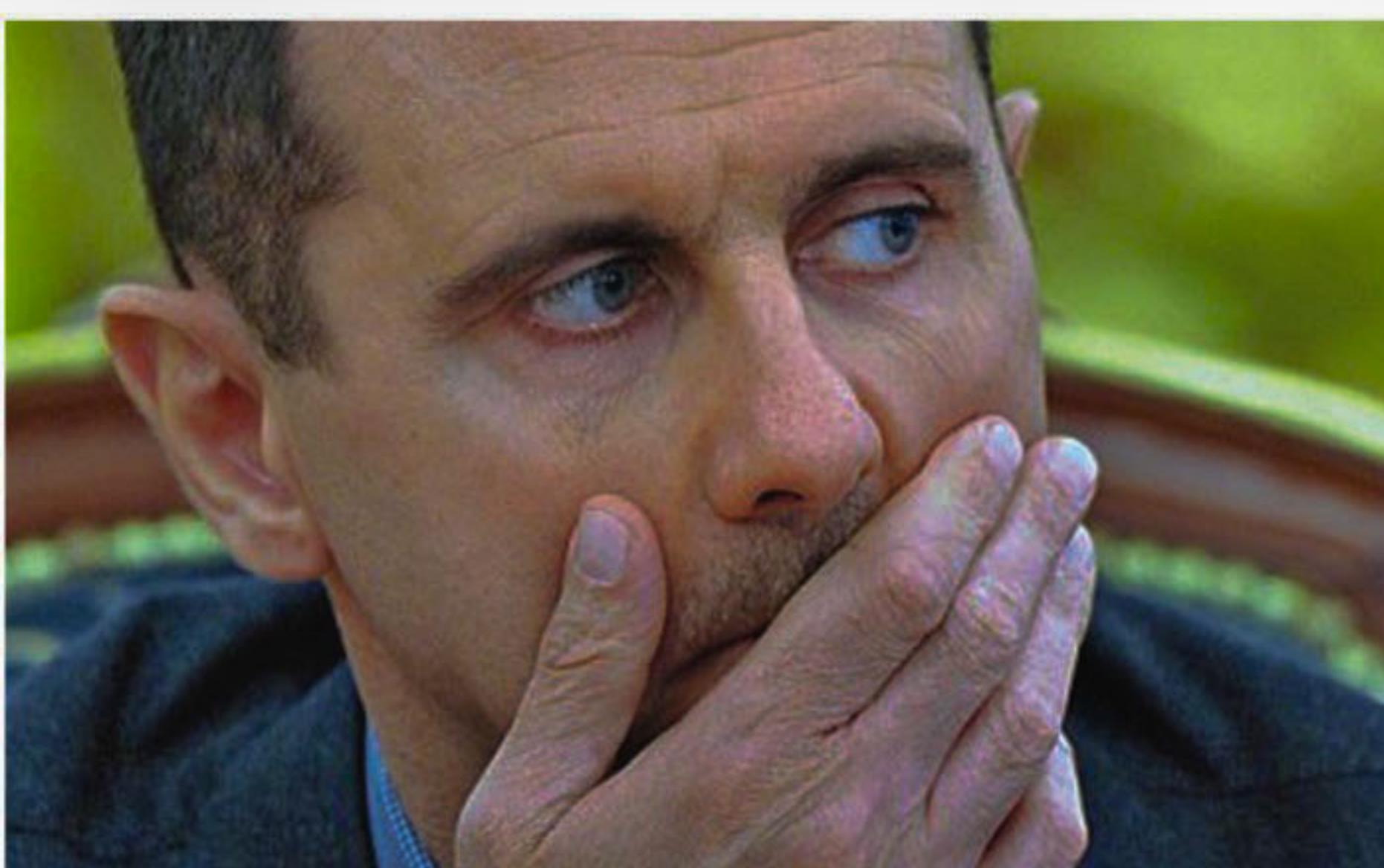
Why is Arab League against Syria?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

SYRIA is bordered on two sides by countries that have been torn apart by civil wars in recent decades, Lebanon and Iraq. Syria's ruler Assad has repeatedly invoked the spectre of unrestrained sectarian conflict as a likely outcome of any attempt to topple him.

Syria's relations with the Sunni Muslim majority states are uneasy because the minority, Nusayria /Alawite (Shiite) sect to which the family of President Bashar al-Assad belongs, rules the country and is close to Iran. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 80s, Syria supported Iran and Sunni Arabs cannot forget the Syrian support. Iran has become a regional power and its allies are Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, Sunni States want to de-link Syria from Iran to reduce Iran's influence in the region. Given the above background, the Arab League's position against Syria's President Assad is not surprising.

Qatar took the lead to introduce an Arab League resolution in the UN Security Council on February 4 calling for "political transition to a democratic, plural political system" but it was vetoed by Russia and China as being "unbalanced." Moscow said the draft - which backed an Arab League peace plan calling for President Assad to hand over power - would have forced regime change on Syria.



The western powers were annoyed with both Russia and China because they saw that the veto would unleash more violence in Syria. On February 6, the US closed its embassy in Syria and several European countries, like, France, UK, Italy, Spain, Netherlands and Belgium have recalled their ambassadors.

Arab League members were not happy with the veto and the Gulf Arab states, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Kuwait say they are expelling Syrian ambassadors in their countries and recalling their envoys from Syria.

The Arab League went to the General Assembly of the UN where there is no veto by big powers. On February 16, the United Nations General Assembly passed a nonbinding resolution endorsing the Arab League plan for the Syrian President to step down. The vote was 137 in favor and 12 against, with 17 abstentions. China and Russia were among the no votes on the resolution.

Syria's UN Ambassador Bashar Jaafari lashed out at the vote, calling the League of Arab States "broken, both politically and morally." He added that, "If things continue in this manner ... the United Nations will collapse -- morally first and entirely second."

Sectarianism in Arab World

One of the disastrous consequences of the US-led invasion of Iraqi

has been the continued sectarian warfare between Sunnis and Shiites.

Sectarianism appears to be a totally new game in the Arab world, and is different from the conflict between the radical Arab nationalists and the conservative pan-Islamists of the late 50s and 60s.

Sectarian warfare in Iraq has its analogues in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Afghanistan and Pakistan. A new tension is unfolding in the region between Shiite states, such as Iraq and Lebanon, supported by Shiite Iran and Sunni states, such as, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Gulf States.

Former President Mubarak of Egypt caustically remarked that the Arab Shiite appeared more loyal to Iran than to their respective countries. When Shiite Hezbollah (Party of Allah) launched missile attacks against Israel, three Sunni states denounced Hezbollah's actions for its "adventurism" and dragging the region into a dangerous war.

Russian Foreign Minister's visit

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Syria on February 7 and met President Assad. The Russian foreign minister's arrival was greeted by hundreds and thousands of Assad's supporters because Russian veto had saved the Assad regime.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called for a solution to the crisis based on Arab League initiatives on November 2, 2011 to end the violence. After meeting Lavrov, Syrian media quoted President Bashar al-Assad as saying he was willing to cooperate with "any efforts towards stability."

On February 15, President Assad announced that a nationwide referendum would be held in March on a new constitution that would be the centerpiece of what he said would be a plan to reform the country.

The new constitution would enshrine freedom of speech and worship, along with other basic liberties and end the current monopoly on power held by Assad's Baath Party, which has ruled for four decades.

The opposition dismissed the referendum announcement as an effort to buy time, and it was not clear how the government could carry out a vote in a country disrupted by violence.

The uprising in Syria -- influenced by the Arab Spring movement that forced regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen -- was sparked

about a year ago in the southern city of Daraa with demonstrators angered by the arrests of young people who scrawled anti-government graffiti. Their grievances and calls for reforms were met with a violent security crackdown, and the unrest there served to catalyze anti-government protests across the nation.

President Bashar al-Assad shows no sign of backing away from his determination to confront the protests in his country. While there is a lot of talk of reform the reality is that the crackdown against demonstrators has actually intensified.

Human rights groups and activists say more than 7,000 people have been killed by Syrian security forces since the uprising began last March. The UN stopped estimating the death toll in Syria after it passed 5,400 in January, saying it was too difficult to confirm. President Assad's government says at least 2,000 members of the security forces have been killed.

Arab people have succeeded in removing the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Unless Syrian president takes swift action to introduce drastic reforms towards multi-party democracy and human rights, the wave of armed protests in Syria could eventually remove Assad from power.

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The Syrian impasse

IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN

BACHAR al-Assad has risen to the heights of being one of the least popular men in the world. He is denounced as a tyrant, indeed a very bloody tyrant, by almost everyone. Even those governments that refuse to denounce him seem to be counseling him to curb his repressive ways and to make some sort of political concessions to his internal opponents.

So, how is it that he ignores all this advice and proceeds to continue to use maximum force to continue political control of Syria? Why is there no outside intervention to force his removal from office? To answer these questions, let us start with assessing his strengths. To start with, he has a reasonably strong army, and up to now, with a few exceptions, the army and other structures of force in the country have stayed loyal to the regime. Secondly, he still seems to command the support of at least half of the population in what is increasingly being described as a civil war.

The key government posts and the officer corps are in the hands of the Alawi, a branch of Shi'a Islam. The Alawi are a minority of the population and certainly fear what would happen to them if the opposition forces, largely Sunni, were to come to power. In addition, the other significant minority forces - the Christians, the Druze, and the Kurds - seem to be equally wary of a Sunni government. Finally, the large merchant bourgeoisie have yet to turn against Assad and the Baath regime.

But is this really enough? If this were all, I doubt that Assad could really hold out much longer. The regime is being squeezed economically. The opposition Free Syrian Army is being fed arms by Iraqi Sunnis and probably Qatar. And the chorus of denunciations in the world press and by politicians of all stripes grows louder by the day.

Yet, I don't think that, a year or two from now, we will find that Assad is gone or the regime basically changed. The reason is that those who are denouncing him the loudest do not really want him to go. Let us take them one by one.

Saudi Arabia: The Foreign Minister told the New York Times that "violence had to be stopped and the Syrian government not given any more chances." This sounds really strong until you notice that he added that "international intervention had to be ruled out." The fact is that Saudi Arabia wants the credit of opposing Assad but is very afraid of a successor government. It knows that in a post-Assad (probably fairly anarchic) Syria, al-Qaeda would find a base. And the Saudis know that al-Qaeda's number one objective is to overthrow the Saudi regime. Ergo, "no international intervention."

Israel: Yes, the Israelis continue to obsess about Iran. And yes, Baathist Syria continues to be an Iran-friendly power. But when all is said and done, Syria has been a relatively quiet Arab neighbor, an island of stability for the Israelis. Yes, the Syrians aid Hezbollah, but Hezbollah too has been relatively quiet. Why would the Israelis really want to take the risk of a turbulent post-Baathist Syria? Who would then wield power, and might they not have to improve their credentials by expanding jihad against Israel? And wouldn't the fall of Assad lead to upsetting the relative quiet and stability that Lebanon now seems to enjoy, and might this not end up with the further strengthening and renewed radicalism of Hezbollah? Israel has a lot to lose, and not too much to gain, if Assad falls.

The United States: The U.S. government talks a good line. But have you noticed how wary it is in practice? The Washington Post headlined an article on Feb. 11, "As carnage builds, U.S. sees 'no good options' on Syria." The story points out that the U.S. government has "no appetite for a military intervention." No appetite, despite the pressure of neocon intellectuals like Charles Krauthammer who is honest enough to admit "it's not just about freedom." It's really, he says, about undoing the regime in Iran. But isn't that exactly why Obama and his advisors see no good options? They were pressured into the Libyan operation. The U.S. didn't lose many lives, but did they really gain geopolitical advantage as a result? Is the new Libyan regime, if one can say there is a new Libyan regime, something better? Or is this the beginning of a long internal instability, as Iraq has turned out to be?

So, when Russia vetoed the U.N. resolution on Syria, I can imagine a sigh of relief in Washington. The pressure to up the ante and begin a Libyan-style intervention was lifted. Obama was protected against Republican harassment on Syria by the Russian veto. And Susan Rice, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, could shift all blame to the Russians. They were "disgusting," she said, oh so diplomatically.

France: Always nostalgic for their once-dominant role in Syria, Foreign Minister Alain Juppé shouts and denounces. But troops? You've got to be kidding. There's an election coming up, and sending troops would not be at all popular, especially since this would be no piece of cake, as was Libya.

Turkey: Turkey has improved its relations with the Arab world incredibly in the last decade. It's definitely unhappy about the civil war on its borders. It would love to see some kind of political compromise. But Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu is quoted as guaranteeing that "Turkey is not providing arms or support to army defectors." Turkey wants essentially to be friends to all sides. And besides, Turkey has its own Kurdish question, and Syria might offer active support, which hitherto it has refrained from doing.

So, who wants to intervene in Syria? Perhaps Qatar. But Qatar, however wealthy it is, is scarcely a major military power. The bottom line is that, however loud the rhetoric and however ugly the civil war, no one really, really wants Assad to go. So, in all probability, he will stay.

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