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Reform in the Arab World: External Influences and Regional Debates

By

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Reform in the Arab world has acquired a centre-stage in the aftermath of the 9/11 because all the perpetrators belonged to the Arab World. This catastrophic event posed many questions. The implicit assumption was that Arab world needs to undergo the radical transformation in terms of its governance and democratisation which will have no place for violence and extremism. Departing from its 50-years old policy of maintaining status quo and cultivating autocratic regimes of the West Asia, the USA made democratisation a central plank of its national security policy. President George Bush has been consistently demanding that Arab world must reform itself. Stung by the criticism directed towards Islam/Arab world, many Arab belonging to the broad spectrum of the society also began to ponder over the malaise ailing to their countries and raised voices for reform in every spheres of life. This demand for reform has generated a very lively debate across the Arab world and even beyond that in the US and Europe. Various terms such as good governance, transparency and accountability, election, freedom of speech and expression, rule of law, independent judiciary, women's empowerment and human rights have become an important part of the lexicon of the region.

In this backdrop, the book under review dealing with the above crucial subject is an important contribution to the literature pertaining to this field. Though there are many articles scattered in the journals and newspapers and also various reports etc, but there is no study, to the best of my knowledge, presenting this important theme in a single volume. The present study is a compendium of the momentous debates taking place on the issue of reform and vividly brings out various nuances of these debates. The avowed aim of this present study containing seven chapters and three useful appendices is to provide "an account of this extraordinary intellectual ferment in the Arab world and the attempts of governments, Arab and foreign, to cope politically and intellectually with these new challenges".

The author of the book under review, Mr. Talmiz Ahmad, has successfully performed this cumbersome task. Mr. Ahmad, though currently posted in the Ministry of Petroleum entrusted with an important division exploring the various avenues of international cooperation to meet India's steadily growing energy requirements, is a

distinguished diplomat in the India's Ministry of External Affairs. His diplomatic responsibilities spanning over three decades had taken him to several places in the region. This has given him a deep insight and understanding of the psyche of the Arabs, their problems and predicaments which are reflected throughout in this present study.

The study has eloquently brought out the role of the US, the main protagonist, towards the issue of reform and attempt to influence its content and direction. The September 11 made the US establishment as well as academia to examine the factors that led to the attack on it. There was almost unanimity across broad spectrum of opinion that Middle East region is the source of terrorism against the US. However, problem with the US approach is that it is not ready to make a sincere and honest appraisal of its own policies over the last five decades towards the region which had contributed in great deal towards building resentment and hatred against the US.

Rather the US establishment which is under the dominant influence of the neocons is demanding sweeping and radical changes in the region and even thinking of redrawing the map of the region. The promotion of democracy, even if needed by force, has become the central plank of the US strategy to safeguard its interest. Regime change in Iraq was the first step in this process. The neocon, Joshua Muravchik, said: "Change towards democratic regimes in Tehran and Baghdad would unleash a tsunami across the Islamic World" (P.6).

On the question of reform in the region it has been found that some of the leaders of the region have also acknowledged the necessity at various fora and occasions. On April 27, 2004 Saud Al-Faisal, Saudi Foreign Minister, remarked: "Lest anyone misconstrue, let me affirm here, with as strong conviction as I can make, that the leadership in Saudi Arabia remain steadfast in their effort to push their programme for reform. For us reform is an absolute requisite for the advancement of the country and its people regardless from where the opposition is coming from or from where the external pressure is being applied".(Piii) It is also pointed out that the current debate in the region is nature and pace of reform. The book provides a detail account of various shades of opinion across the Arab World on the nature of reform. Various sections of the society such as journalists, lawyers, academics, businessmen and even women have been given unprecedented freedom to air their views in many of the Arab countries.

The Arab Human Development Reports' (AHDR) of 2002 and 2003 provide strong evidence for reform. The reports, using comprehensive data, has graphically brought out the underlying causes - lack of freedom, empowerment of women and knowledge terming them as three deficits leading towards the extremism. The report called for comprehensive reform to remedy the situation. Even the US administration has quoted extensively to reinforce its agenda of democrat-isation and reform in the Middle East. The US unveiled various initiatives such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative

(MEPI), the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) and finally the Broader Middle East and North Africa Partnership (BMEP), revised version of the GMEI, outlining the blueprint of the reform. The author has pointed out that at ground level no significant progress has been achieved. People of the region suspect role of US in the ongoing debate for the reform. The book points out that "The US continues to have little moral authority and less credibility as a sponsor of reform and change due to its record in the region and the widespread perception that its strategic interests have a continued need for and even dependence on authoritarian regimes which would sub-serve its interests particularly in regard to energy, Israel, and combating extremist Islam". (p. 88)

The leadership of the Arab world is facing serious dilemma over how to respond to the growing demand for wider participation in the decision making, transparency and rule of law etc. The governments of many countries have allowed greater freedom to the press etc. but have yet to embrace reform wholeheartedly. Some governments have tried to give wider participation by introducing municipal/local elections. The book has delineated various reasons for the tardy and uneven response of the governments. Summing up the dilemma of the Arab World, Author has appositely remarked "The Arab World is today at a cross-road" (p. 97) because there is no sign of sincere commitment on the part of Arab governments and also the USA. Both are trying to accommodate each others' concern at the cost of the interest of the people of the region. This has also been succinctly summed up by Fred Halliday in these words: Despite the intensity of the debate no one is certain where this "Arab Spring" will go, and indeed if it is a spring at all.

Another important feature of the book is highlight of the debate about the role of Islam in the reformed polity. While discussing scores of opinion, Author has quoted Elizabeth Shakman Hurd saying that the central challenge facing the countries of the Middle East in the 21st century is "developing a legitimate practice of democracy that avoids the pit falls of both authoritarian secularism and militant Islamism".(p. 76)

The sensible approach, according to her is that public religiosity be accepted in the public sphere "as long as it is accompanied by respect for competing perspectives" (P 78). In fact, there is a consensus among observers that it would be unwise and impractical to transplant Western models onto the Arab landscape. Whatever be the system, it has to be based on the indigenous ethos of the region of which Islam is an integral part. There may be ambiguity regarding the structure and form of the government in Islamic precepts but there is no doubt that good governance, transparency, rule of law, accountability and justice are the hallmark of the Islamic tenets.

The author is of the opinion that this momentous debate has failed to address the central question— Why Arab states are lacking in democracy? In order to understand

the situation in proper perspective, it is imperative to take into account the political sociology of the region. The historical evolution and creation of many Arab countries on geopolitical considerations of the imperial powers are important factors which have played important part in influencing the course of development within many Arab countries.

The author has, however, made a serious and worthwhile attempt to present a detailed analytical portrayal of the debate on Arab Reform. The present reviewer has enjoyed reading this book and would suggest to everybody who wants to have a grasp of the nuances of this momentous debate which is likely to play a very critical role in the destiny of the region.