



Brics and the Democratic Upheaval in the Arab World

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Abstract:

More than a decade ago, the Arab world was shaken by an occurrence that altered the way the world perceived power dynamics between the ruler and the ruled in the Arab region. Autocrats fell as demands for democratic representations roared. Elections were held for the first time in some places and Arab outpourings on social media caught attention of the world. This surge of activities demanded attention from major leaders, countries and associations. At the time of the upsurge, BRICS as a group of fastest growing economies of the world was in its nascent stage and yet every member country had established ties with the Arab world. The paper attempts to analyze the stand taken by the group towards the democratic upheaval in the Arab world as it happened then, besides examining the interests of the individual countries towards those in the Arab world.

Keywords: BRICS, democracy, upheaval, Arab, collective.

Introduction: In December 2010, began an unprecedented process of revolt, protests and uprisings in the Arab world. Thousands of people gathered on streets demanding freedom and democracy and asking the autocratic leaders, to step down. The early protests against the government in Tunisia soon spread to 17 other countries in the region including Syria, Yemen, Algeria, and Morocco which was affected as the uprisings even touched the shores of Persian Gulf. Though the authorities heavily clamped down on the protesters and used violent means to quell the demonstrations, these pro democratic movements marked the downfall of autocratic leaders who had ruled for a long time. What happened in Tunisia and more particularly in Egypt is something unbelievable. A leaderless crowd of a million people, staging continuous demonstration for eighteen days and that too non-violently is something every democracy will pray for. Tunisia's President Zine al Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi were forced to step down and governmental changes were realized in other countries of the region. These revolts and demonstrations did not restrict themselves to the region alone but inspired many others outside the region too.

The upheavals shook and surprised many across the regions and they became a matter of international concern as reactions emanated from all over the world. BRICS was no exception. These 'five most important non-western powers on the world stage' reacted and responded to the upheaval cautiously. They reacted individually as each of them has

bilateral relations with countries in the Arab world and collectively on the common platform of BRICS.

The BRICS: The larger emerging economies of the world united to form a forum in 2008 initially involving Brazil, Russia, India and China. The concept was first mooted in 2001 by the British Economist Jim O'Neill, stating that the "world policymaking forums should be re-organised and in particular, the G7 should be adjusted to incorporate BRIC representatives" as, he referred, "over the next 10 years, the weight of the BRICs and especially China in world GDP will grow".¹ Following this, the foreign ministers of four countries met in 2006 and subsequently in June 2009 the first formal meeting of the leaders of the BRIC nations was held in Yekaterinburg in Russia. In 2011 South Africa joined the forum that was renamed as BRICS. Since then, besides finance, trade and economics BRICS leaders have also engaged in discussions regarding science, technology, national security, peace and other social issues. As the association continues to strengthen its position, speculations are rife about its extension to include Indonesia and Kazakhstan as countries with stable growth rate may aspire to join hands.

The BRICS countries share commonalities and at the same time they are also disparate or 'famously different'. They are politically diverse; have varying levels of economic development; are differently situated in terms of resources and energy intensity; have divergent demographic trends; besides, Russia and China are established global powers with permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council whereas India, Brazil and South Africa aspire to acquire a prominent position in the UN.

In the coming years, these countries from Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America, are expected to play a major role as growth drivers of the world economy and few similarities in the vision for the future have brought them together perhaps posing them as a response to the world's traditional leaders. In the Delhi Summit 2012, it was declared that the "BRICS is a platform for dialogue and cooperation among countries...for the promotion of peace, security and development in a multipolar, interdependent and increasingly complex, globalising world." The transcontinental dimension of their interaction is expected to add value and significance to their stand on various matters. BRICS has commented on the movements in the Arab world.

The Arab world: Largely defined by the commonality of Arabic language, the Arab world includes twenty-two countries which are also a part of Arab League.² As geographical entities they stretch from the Arabian Sea in the east to Morocco towards the Atlantic Ocean in the west from the south of Mediterranean in the north, to the Indian Ocean towards the south east including the horn of Africa. According to World Bank data, the total population of the Arab world is 369.8 million of which 57% is urban.³ The Arab world has a rich diversity of ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. Islam is the religion of majority of those in the Arab world though a sizable number of Christian populations exist and a particular mention can be made of Egyptian Copts and Lebanese Maronites which are by far the largest Christian groups in the region. Besides, there are Armenians and Assyrians too.

There are Kurds and Berbers apart from the ethno-religious minorities as Yezdis and the Druze settled largely in Iraq and Syria-Lebanon respectively. Most of the countries in the Arab region follow Sunni Islam except for Iraq and Bahrain which are Shia majority countries. Politically, the Arab countries had authoritarian regimes and democracy seemed to be eluding the region. Economically, of all the Arab countries, the Persian Gulf countries are rich in oil. An important commodity for trade relations with the adjacent countries.

BRICS and the upheaval: BRIC had met for the first official summit, almost one and half years before these upheavals, in 2009 at the G20 Finance ministers meeting and issued their first ever communique stating that through its economic agenda BRIC aimed at better involvement in the global affairs.⁴

The first summit held after the early democratic uprisings in the Arab world, was in April 2011 in China, almost four months after the first protests in Tunisia, had been witnessed. By then the protests had arisen in the other North African and West Asian countries as Bahrain (February '11), Oman (February '11), Yemen (January '11), Syria, Morocco (February '11) and Libya (February '11). These were significant events with far reaching consequences for the region and the international community at large. The same year BRIC increased its scope with the membership of South Africa and the forum was now renamed BRICS.

Five years since the revolts began, the events in the Arab world are yet to reach a conclusion and the situation is still in the 'working process' though power has changed hands multiple times and enough blood have been shed on the streets. The international community remains alert to the happenings in the region and so also, the BRICS.

It is necessary to understand why BRICS's reaction to the Arab democratic upheaval should be considered important:

1. BRICS makes up for a quarter of the world's landmass, over 40% of world's population and a 25 per cent share in the world GDP.⁵ BRICS is a 'potential forum' in the power paradigm. "As a pressure group it can be a catalyst in international reform".⁶
2. Of the 5 countries, except Brazil, 4 are in the vicinity of the region of upheaval and hence, will face an impact of regional happenings of such magnanimity. Security and energy issues are vital for the responses.
3. Individually, all the countries have significant bi-lateral relations with one or more than one country of the region and these can have impact on their trade and diplomatic relations. For e.g. Brazil's relations with Libya and Syria; Syria's strong alliance with Russia; India's requirement for energy resources and presence of large number of Indians in, particularly, the Gulf region; China's energy requirements and building external demand for Chinese goods and South Africa's obvious involvement.⁷
4. It was argued that BRICS can consider this as an important "(new) space" to influence international deliberations on the response to these happenings.⁸

5. The region has for long been penetrated and influenced by Western powers and continues to be so. One of the primary goals of BRICS from the beginning has been to counter the entrenched global hegemony of the west. It is argued that they are concerned that American economic policy and western responses to the Arab Spring could be destabilizing.⁹ The people in the North African-West Asian region have initiated a wave of protests in favour of democracy and that attempt will not be ignored by the BRICS nations.

The dynamics of relations of the BRICS countries with the West Asian- North African countries have dictated their response on a common platform and otherwise.

Reaction to UN decision on Libya: The earliest of the Libyan protests erupted in the town of Benghazi in February 2011 and soon spread to other places including Tripoli, the largest city of Libya. The armed revolts aimed to topple the Muammar Gaddafi government as the Green Square became a popular spot for the protests. In March 2011, The UNSC Resolution 1973 was passed for a military intervention in the Libyan civil war.

The still BRIC- Brazil, India, China and Russia (along with Germany) chose to abstain from voting on the U.N. Security Council resolution which authorized the creation of a no-fly zone in Libya. The BRICS called for resolving the Libyan crisis through “peaceful means and dialogue” and to avoid use of force. Even while the BRIC members were talking of “peaceful means and dialogues”, Gaddafi’s son had already warned protestors that if they refused to accept reforms offered the country would face civil war.¹⁰

Stand on Syria: Compared to the other countries in the Arab world, early protests in Syria against Bashar al-Assad’s government began much later i.e. only in mid-March 2011. The south western city of Daraa was the beginning point. The government resorted to violence and the early peaceful protests turned brutal. The country has been in a state of civil war since then.

The UN members reacted and a draft U.N. Security Council resolution of October, 2011 condemned Syria and hinted it could face sanctions if its violent crackdown on protesters continued. Russia and China vetoed the draft. Russia cited it as “conflict of political approaches” while China claimed to be unhappy over the text of the draft.¹¹ Brazil, India, and South Africa abstained from voting.

In February 2012, Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution endorsing an Arab League plan for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to hand power to a deputy to make way for a transition towards democracy. Russia complained that the draft resolution was an improper and biased attempt at “regime change” in Syria.¹²

On February 4, 2012, India voted in favor of a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that called for a Syrian-led political process in response to the violence in Syria. In February, India played a significant role in the drafting of the Security Council’s resolution on Syria, which advocated an inclusive, Syrian-led political solution. Russia and China vetoed the resolution because they felt it did not rule out western-sponsored regime

change.¹³ “Our support for the resolution is in accordance with our support for the efforts by the Arab League for a peaceful resolution of the crisis through a Syrian-led inclusive political process,” said Hardeep Singh Puri, the Indian ambassador to the U.N.¹⁴

Russia and China vetoed a Western- and Arab-driven draft resolution endorsing an Arab League plan for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to hand power to a deputy to make way for a transition towards democracy. The remaining 13 members of the council including India voted in favor of the draft resolution. Russia complained that the draft resolution was an improper and biased attempt at "regime change" in Syria. South Africa abstained.¹⁵

Unlike the U.S. and its EU partners, India and Brazil have not placed democracy promotion on their foreign policy agendas. The more important fact is that India supports multilateral democracy-building through the U.N. Democracy Fund. Since 2005 it has been the second largest donor country, having so far contributed \$25 million, after the U.S., which has contributed \$38 million. That is far more than the amounts donated by rich Germany — \$11,306,348 — and Britain — \$609, 350 — to the Fund.¹⁶

Collective decision:

- I) In the Sanya Declaration in 2011, a joint document, at the BRICS Leaders Meeting in Sanya, China, under the theme "Broad Vision, Shared Prosperity", a broad consensus defined the stand on matters related to the Arab world. BRIC called for resolving the Libyan crises through peaceful means and dialogue and to avoid use of any force encouraging the UN and other regional organizations to “play appropriate role”.¹⁷
- II) The fourth 2012 Summit at Delhi chose to comment on the events by reflecting on larger issues of conflict in the region. “The period of transformation taking place in the Middle East and North Africa should not be used as a pretext to delay resolution of lasting conflicts but rather it should serve as an incentive to settle them...” it stated, particularly referring to the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁸
- III) In March, 2013 summit held in Durban, Africa the BRICS express a deep concern with the deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in Syria and condemn the increasing violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law as a result of continued violence. “We believe that the Joint Communiqué of the Geneva Action Group provides a basis for resolution of the Syrian crisis and reaffirm our opposition to any further militarization of the conflict.”¹⁹

In the Summit BRICS insisted on a broad national dialogue as a condition to meet the legitimate aspirations of all sections of Syrian society and respect for Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty (as expressed by the Geneva Joint Communiqué and appropriate UNSC resolutions). At the Durban meet the BRICS supported the efforts of the UN-League of Arab States Joint Special Representative and stated, “in view of the deterioration of the humanitarian

situation in Syria, we call upon all parties to allow and facilitate immediate, safe, full and unimpeded access to humanitarian organizations to all in need of assistance. We urge all parties to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers.”²⁰

The Declaration further stated, “We express our deep concern at the current situation in Syria and call for an immediate end to all violence and violations of human rights in that country. Global interests would best be served by dealing with the crisis through peaceful means that encourage broad national dialogues that reflect the legitimate aspirations of all sections of Syrian society and respect Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty. Our objective is to facilitate a Syrian-led inclusive political process, and we welcome the joint efforts of the United Nations and the Arab League to this end. We encourage the Syrian government and all sections of Syrian society to demonstrate the political will to initiate such a process, which alone can create a new environment for peace”.²¹

- IV) The Fortaleza Declaration of July, 2014 of the 6th BRICS Summit apart from expressing concern and dismissing military solution to the conflict, highlighted the need to avoid further militarization of Syria. Expressing concern over terrorism and reiterated the complete elimination of Syrian chemical weapons.²²

Collective statements are issued about the democratic upheaval in the West Asia-North Africa region in the annual declarations. The group however does not seem to share the enthusiasm reflected in the western blocks about the overthrow of dictatorship in some countries. The BRICS have played a low-key role on the upheavals whether they toppled the existing governments as in the case of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or where the protests strangely went quiet as in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, or Oman. This raises few questions. The group that was formed on the basis of the economic status of its member countries has within no time proven to look beyond trade. Will it then be successful in defining the contours of an alternate power strong enough to respond to the Arab upheavals? Will it be able to define a strong common stand that can respond to the cry for democracy in the Arab region? Will it be affected by individual interests of the member countries towards those in the Arab region? Will they be able to take a common stand in matters of foreign policy? Is it even expected?

The BRICS’ impact can be evaluated based on the degree of political coherence among them, as well as their capacity to influence the international system.²³ Besides the BRICS countries have significant interaction with the Arab countries. China depends on the energy in the West Asian region and is the largest net importer of oil having already overtaken US.²⁴ Saudi Arabia accounts for one-fifth of Chinese oil imports besides the non-oil trade is also considerable. It is argued that China will grow more dependent on the energy in the region and will require a balancing act vis-a-vis the overwhelming diplomatic and military advantage enjoyed by the US.²⁵ Russia has had strategic, political and economic engagement with the Arab region. Oil is one of Russia’s major export commodities and keeping the price of oil stable globally remains one of the concerns of Russia. Russia enjoys

historical relations with Syria which is its 'closest ally' in the Arab World and has played a strategic role in the Syrian Civil War. As for Brazil, it had some of its most important construction companies having projects in Libya. South Africa's economic ties have expanded and some of its top export market countries are in the West Asian region. India's strategic, economic and cultural ties with the region have continued to remain strong and its dependence on the oil rich countries has defined its relations particularly with the Persian Gulf region. Around 3.5 million Indian expatriates stay in the Persian Gulf region alone.

It can be concluded then that the bilateral relations enjoyed by the individual BRICS countries with the countries in the West Asian region will largely guide the BRICS's stand on matters in the region. Naturally one should not be surprised that the collective reaction of BRICS to the political upheavals in the Arab world is and will remain the LCD, the least common denominator, of their individual stand and interests.

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