

Syrian Conundrum and Flawed Western Agenda

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The decision by the 'Friends of Syria', a conglomerate of 70 Arab and Western countries including the United States on 01 April 2012, to fund the opposition Syrian National Council will further aggravate the situation that was slowly returning to normalcy. The decision negates all the recent gains made by Mr. Kofi Annan, a former U.N. Secretary General, who is serving as the joint Arab League-U.N. envoy for Syria and could lead to an all-out civil war and could further aggravate the delicate sectarian faultlines within the Islamic world. Iraq's absence from 'Friends of Syria' conference held next door in Istanbul and its success in preventing any drastic action against Syria during the Arab League Conference in Baghdad is a clear manifestation of the growing division. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had already warned about the danger by stating that arming either side in Syria would lead to a "proxy war."

The growing clamour for 'British educated' President Bashar Al Assad's scalp in the western media raises many startling questions. It appears as if every single small incident is being exaggerated and blown out of proportion, by the same media, which maintained a stoic silence when tanks rolled down the streets of Manama. There can be hardly anything more ironical than Arab League going to United Nations to push Syria for reforms. Saudi monarchy and Gulf sheikhdoms asking Syria to usher in democratic reforms is akin to kettle calling the pot black. Syria is certainly not a liberal democracy and has been ruled by Assad family for over four decades, but it undoubtedly is amongst the most secular and socially liberal regimes in the region. Western educated President Bashar ever since his

ascendance to power, has exhibited his desire to usher in political reforms, the pace may have been slow, but the intent was always correct.

What is even more galling is the fact that the Arab opposition to the current regime in Syria is primarily driven by a sectarian agenda. The obscurantist, authoritarian regimes in the region with absolute medieval mindsets are upset that despite its impeccable secular credential, the ruling elite does not belong to the majority sect in the Islamic world. The fact that the current Syrian regime is dominated primarily by Alawite Shias, even though the majority of Syria's population is Sunni Arab, is the main reason behind the crocodile tears being shed for democracy by these autocratic regimes.

Unfortunately, the Syrian opposition space has already been usurped by the radical Islamists led by Islamic Brotherhood and they are not interested in 'Reforms', but in 'Regime Change'. This is probably the reason behind their decision to boycott the referendum on new constitution, which promises multiparty democracy in 90 days. According to reports from Iraq, Al Qaeda elements have moved to Syria, infiltrated the opposition ranks and are indulging in violence. They are obviously not interested in ushering in democracy; but to ensure the fall of probably the only independent secular government in the region. Their rise to power will ensure the burial of liberal Syrian society and persecution of all ethnic, religious and sectarian minorities. The Saudi and Qatari support to the extremist elements within the opposition ranks have forced the religious minorities like Alawites, twelve Shias, Ismailis, Druze, Christians and Yazidis, as well as ethnic minorities like Kurds, Circassians, Assyrians and Armenians to rally behind the regime.

The US led western world, has somehow bought the Saudi agenda of bringing in a regime change in Syria, probably in the belief that it would isolate Iran, as the regime has been close to Tehran. Unfortunately, it would have exactly the opposite effect. The difference in western response to disturbances in Bahrain and Syria is too stark and any externally sponsored regime change in Syria would further push the Shias worldwide to rally behind Iran as their only saviour. The fact that Alawites are looking up to Ayatollahs from Iran as their saviours is ironical as twelve Shias (Ithna Asharis - the official religion of Iran) have traditionally considered Alawites as heretics. By its myopic policies, the west has probably lost a golden opportunity of building up an alternate Arabic Shiite leadership.

The US actions are also probably driven by its concern for the security of Israel, which is surrounded with hostile neighbours. With the exception of Egypt, Syria is the strongest country bordering Israel. However, despite Syrian

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belligerence under Assad, it will be a far better option for Israel than the regimes led by Islamists that might succeed it. In fact, with the regime change in Egypt, the best insurance for Israel will be to return occupied Syrian territory and enter into friendly relations with secular and democratic regimes in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

The West needs to learn from the experience of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, that an incremental and orderly change is always preferable to chaotic revolutionary changes. Unlike Egypt or Tunisia, a substantial section of population is mortally scared of Islamists and is firmly behind President Assad. Almost all the minorities and a significant part of secular Arab population support his reforms. The military and all important government functionaries are firmly with him and more significantly, unlike in the case of Gaddafi, Russia and China are unlikely to abandon him. It is therefore impossible for the opposition to oust the President militarily. Continuing violence is unlikely to bring in a regime change, it only helps Al Qaeda and its allies, who want to fish in the troubled waters to eventually, establish a global Islamic Emirate.

The global community needs to mediate between the opposition and the government. It must ask the opposition to shun violence, while impressing upon President Assad to expedite reforms and go in for multiparty elections. The new constitution has already been approved overwhelmingly in the referendum, which the opposition regards as sham. The regime has already accepted Kofi Annan's plan of immediate ceasefire and has agreed to move heavy weapons and troops from population centres by 10 April 2012. Appointment of neutral UN observers to oversee the ceasefire and subsequent elections will make them more credible. In the interim, President Assad must strive to make his government more broad-based. The West must appreciate the pluralistic nature of Syrian society and realise that Syria is probably the last bastion of secularism standing against the wave of Islamic radicalism that is sweeping through the Arab world.

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