

Arab Spring & Pakistan

The winds of change which arose in Tunisia following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in a small village on December 17, 2010, and which have since then swept through many countries in the Arab world, may finally arrive in Pakistan.

The most important aspect of the Arab Spring is “hope”. Hope can, in fact be the other name of this movement which has reinvigorated millions of hearts which had experienced nothing but despair for decades – that same dark despair which Pakistanis have experienced at least since the overthrow of Nawaz Sharif’s government by a man whose name will always be linked to the darkest chapter in Pakistan’s history because he not only destroyed institutions, he brought to Pakistan unprecedented violence and despair.

Since that dark day of October 12, 1999, when Nawaz Sharif committed the greatest blunder of his life through his ill-planned and poorly executed order to replace General Musharraf with the Inter-Services Intelligence Director-General Lieutenant-General Ziauddin Butt while Musharraf was en route from Sri Lanka to Karachi, Pakistanis have seen nothing but despair.

Sharif, who was deposed by Musharraf, cannot be held responsible for the action of Pakistan’s last military dictator, but his incompetence was certainly proven beyond doubt by his poorly planned move.

Musharraf’s illegal rule saw some of the most extraordinary events in Pakistan’s history: one man’s will ruling over all institutions, including the supreme judiciary, the capitulation of a nuclear state to the United States of America, the emergence of violence at a scale unknown to Pakistan until then, and the extraordinary involvement of military in all spheres of national life.

When Musharraf was forced out on August 18, 2008, he left behind a dysfunctional parliament and senate and a political vacuum created by the lack of growth of Pakistan’s political parties. Instead of fresh faces entering the political arena after a decade of hopelessness, the farce of general elections held in February 2008 merely brought back old, corrupt, and incompetent bodies without much between their ears.

Instead of hope of a change, the new political order brought back more corruption, more incompetence, and more violence and, most of all, an accidental president, who has since then focused on nothing but consolidation of his own power and wealth. In many areas of national life, Zardari and his colleagues have continued the policies of the military dictator. They have created a culture of despair and doom.

What has contributed most to the lingering of despair is the absence of choice: there was no third political force in Pakistan until recently and the two main parties are filled with old and tiring faces; they have been tried more than once and they had utterly failed. It is in this background that the recent quantum change in Pakistan’s political landscape becomes significant. The hopelessness is vanishing through the almost sudden “rediscovery” of Imran Khan’s voice of

hope and change. In many ways, this can be called the Pakistani version of the Arab Spring.

Of course, there are many differences between Pakistan's political climate and the suffocating authoritarianism of the Arab states where winds of change have blown during the past year, but the current situation in Pakistan resembles the political currents sweeping through the Arab world in that it is able to generate a sense of hope in the masses.

There was no hope left in Pakistan for any change because both mainstream political parties have become personal fiefdoms, and, therefore, what Imran Khan brought to the surface is not merely a third party or third force, but a different possibility, a different paradigm. How would this possibility change actual ground realities remains to be seen. The spread of a new political culture will take its time, but the fact that there is a possibility that Pakistan's new generation can live in hope, rather than despair, is worth attention.

Everywhere, people are sick and tired of the existing political and economic order. This global discontent has yet to gain enough momentum to produce visible change, but movements such as "Occupy Wall Street" and its various offshoots are certainly indicative of a global discontent with the existing order.

This discontent is not of the same kind as that of 1960s, but it is certainly a growing force and Pakistanis may find solace and strength in it. In order to make something out of this vague spirit, they need a new leadership. Imran Khan offers that possibility. In many ways, there has been no new political current in Pakistan since the late 1960s when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto produced the greatest change in the political landscape. Since then, it has been a retrograde process, marred by military interventions. Now, that phase can be buried and a new process can be started. The modus operandi of this new process remains unclear, but fair elections is certainly the most obvious start.

Elections are not due until February 2013. Between now and then, there is just enough time for the new political force to gather strength and – more importantly – depth. Imran Khan and his team need to cultivate political consciousness in the new generation in such a way that he or a handful of other leaders do not become replicas of the current political icons; they need to focus on political process and institutions rather than personality cults and they need to nurture a new culture of politics in Pakistan's otherwise sordid climate.