

A real-time look at the seeds of turmoil in Bahrain and Syria

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*“There is nothing more beautiful than a rainbow,
but it takes both rain and sunshine to make one.
If life is to be rounded and many-colored like a rainbow,
both joy and sorrow must come to it”*

Introduction

In the midst of a revolution, Bahrain and Syria are experiencing tremendous sorrows, and their people sacrificing lives with the hope that the future brings joy and prosperity. Bahrain has a Shiite majority being ruled by a Sunni minority, and its ruling party is accused of attempts to change demographics by encouraging immigrants to take up Bahraini nationality. For some years now, discontent has been creeping in among the people and there are growing demands for a new constitution, release of political prisoners, an independent justice system and freedom of speech.

The demonstrators are not just calling for an end to ruling dynasties but indeed an end to segregation. The current revolutionary challenges in the Bahrain and Syria go beyond sectarianism and are the collective results of economic and social circumstances, including unemployment and inflation. In Syria, despite the repression of emergency rule and harsh controls, the protests continue to grow through internet and mobile phone messages. The unrest comes after the failure to implement reforms expected since 2005. Domestic concerns, including a water crisis and a growing gap between the rich and poor are also issues that have given regional and even international perspectives to the situation.

There is never a single cause behind a revolutionary movement; rather, it takes a series of collective issues that lead to people seeking to change power dynamics. This is what one finds in Bahrain and Syria today. According to the domino theory, “If one country fell under communist control, all of the country’s neighbors were threatened with the same fate,”¹ and the same can be applied to the Arab uprisings. The social

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upheavals in the region were triggered by events in Tunisia and other factors, including poor economic management, political rights and freedom of speech, combined to create the Arab Spring.

This paper will follow the political and constitutional pressures and the economic factors leading to the movements in Syria and Bahrain. The aim is to unearth the causes behind the situation that has reinforced the symbolic stage for a new world order since we know from past experiences that whenever a revolution hits a region, we see history in the making.

Historical background

Bahrain

Bahrain has a rich and ancient history, having been a kingdom of the famous Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Assyrians. It was under Portuguese rule between 1507 and 1602,² and then became part of the Persian Empire. The Persians were later overthrown and expelled by the current colossal Al-Khalifa dynasty.³

The heavy involvement of the British Empire in the Persian Gulf began in the 1880s in order to deal with the piracy that threatened its commercial activities and its monopoly in the region.⁴ As the British dominance grew, Bahrain became its protectorate through a series of treaties. The discovery of oil in 1932⁵ brought herculean modernization and with the growing development, British influence also grew. Indeed, Bahrain developed close relations with the British, welcoming with open arms its bases in the island; the appointment of Charles Dalrymple Belgrave also exhibited the strong ties between the two states.

In order to promote its interests, Britain started seizing different strategic locations in the Persian Gulf, including Aden. This was a hub of trade where the harbors came under control of the British East India Company, which developed its influence in the Middle East as it sought to expand its control over the area.⁶ By virtue of many treaties, Britain started establishing official control, leading to unrest among the Bahraini people. This resulted in a first revolt in 1895,⁷ which was given further impetus by the killing of protestors by British forces. Growing anti-British sentiments and high costs of maintenance led to the withdrawal of forces from Bahrain as Britain ended its protection over the territory.

Syria

In addition to its contentious boundary with Israel, Syria shares borders with Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey, and is home to different ethnic and religious groups, including Kurds, Druze and Alwite. Syria gained independence from France in 1946,⁸ and experienced substantial political unrest during the next two decades, with a series of military governments and an unsuccessful alliance with Egypt against Israel.⁹ The Ba'ath party, based on notions of Arab socialism and nationalism, seized power in 1966, but had its original founders expelled by its radical wing, which instead took control.¹⁰ The founders situated themselves in Iraq and constituted a rivalry between Iraq and Syria that has continued ever since. In 1970, the moderate wing of the party headed by the Lieutenant General Hafiz Al-Assad seized power and ruled the country till 2000.¹¹ His son, Dr. Basher al-Assad, was then formally nominated president in 2000, and reelected in 2007 for another seven year term.¹²

Syria is not an electoral democracy. By the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated for seven years by the Ba'ath party and approved by a popular referendum.¹³ The only legal parties are the Ba'ath party and its smaller coalition partners. Two-thirds of the People's Council seats are reserved for the ruling National Progressive Front (NFP), and closely vetted independent candidates are allowed to participate and contest for about a third of seats.

Dimension of riots

The social Sturm und Drang in the Middle East, particularly in Bahrain and Syria, came about rather abruptly. But the storm had been brewing for some time and signs of discontent were already there due to a number of factors. It is often reported that the main cause of unrest in Bahrain is a sectarian conflict between a ruling Sunni minority and the majority Shia population, and this is in the backdrop of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia that are competing for regional dominance.

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In reality, the issue of sectarianism is quite limited. The Shia-led uprising has mainly economic and institutional agendas, and calls for the government to implement reforms and end informal and formal practices of discrimination. Socio-economic issues and political restrictions remain subjects of much concern for the people. The Syrian uprising is a natural revolt also backed by a number of factors, especially the discontent for dictatorship, as the country experiences the same grievances as those suffered by the other Middle Eastern states.

Political and constitutional pressures

Bahrain

There are a number of political and domestic pressures leading to tensions and hence the protests in Bahrain. The country's rulers are truly dominant and the king determines whether any social or political network and group has the right to openly express its opinions. Public opinion is restricted, regulated and constantly monitored. Indeed, "outside parliament, public criticism of government policy is largely channeled through organized political societies which must be licensed by the ministry of justice and Islamic affairs under the 2005 Political Societies Law."¹⁴

Freedom of expression is quite restricted and 'privately owned, print media remain constrained by the 2002 press and publications law, under which journalists can be imprisoned for up to five years or face heavy fines for criticizing Islam or king, publishing information that threatens state security or encouraging sectarianism.'¹⁵

Journalists covering issues of corruption or state policies are often arrested and prosecuted. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the blogosphere in the Middle East has become popular for discussions on government policies. However, now the government has also placed restrictions on the online flow of information as "all websites are required to register with the ministry of information and site administrators face the same libel as print journalists and are held jointly responsible for content posted on their websites or related chat rooms."¹⁶

The most draconian law in Bahrain - a product of Ian Henderson's state security law - by which thousands were banished and prosecuted, was imposed by Prime Minister Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa in 1974 and scrapped in 2001.¹⁷ And yet it is noted that the protests continue since "Bahraini authorities have not made public any rules or regulations under

the so-called national safety law [and] the authorities apparently think they can do as they wish but they are wrong.”¹⁸

There are several questions surrounding the debate on how political reforms in Bahrain will proceed. The people want a progressive reform process that is in line with their concerns of security, citizenship and rights and it remains to be seen whether their wishes will be fulfilled. This is important since “you cannot raise the expectations of the people and then say to them [that] wait a minute we will go gradually [since] this is not serious political reform.”¹⁹

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What then are the obstacles to substantial reform? Firstly, there are apparent divisions within the regime that prevent progress; and secondly, there are formidable impediments from many other sources. This has been clear since the Iran-Iraq war that instigated fears of Bahrain’s military weaknesses and as the country joined GCC in 1981 to receive intelligence monitoring assistance and approval for purchasing weapons from the United States.

Syria

In Syria, multiple political, social and economic issues have combined to create significant unrest. The issue of transparency, especially when looking at the difference of wealth between the rich and poor, has given additional impetus and legal dimensions. Economic and financial practices are often carried out by unregistered companies and businessmen ensure that companies are not registered in their names; even exporters prefer not to export goods in their or their companies’ names. This allows them to evade taxes and other charges and also brings in influential people who habitually impose themselves as partners or protectorates for businessmen.

Freedom of expression is also very restricted and apart from a handful of non-news radio stations, all other broadcast media is state-owned. Satellite dish antennas are quite common in providing access to

international media and the people are allowed access to the internet through state-run servers that block opposition and foreign-based websites. Moreover, it is reported that email correspondence is ‘monitored by intelligence based services.’²⁰

During 2007, the government also limited the freedom of movement. There are about one and a half million Kurds in Syria making up the largest ethnic minority; around 250,000 have not been entitled to the country’s nationality. It was recommended by the tenth Ba’ath party congress that this issue should be tackled but no progress has been made. Syrian Kurds face some discriminatory treatment – though not prosecution - and many are loyal to the regime as a result of the expanded government bureaucracy. Indeed, ‘the President’s continuing strength is due to the army’s continued loyalty and effectiveness of Syria’s large internal security apparatus.’²¹

However, the Syrians want a change in the balance of power in the government. The cabinet resignation on March 29 did not satisfy protesters as it did not bring any significant change. When the President addressed the parliament, it was expected that he would announce political reforms, including the lifting of state emergency since 1963. Instead, he avoided any mention of reforms and only emphasized the security and stability situation within the state.

Economic dimensions

Bahrain

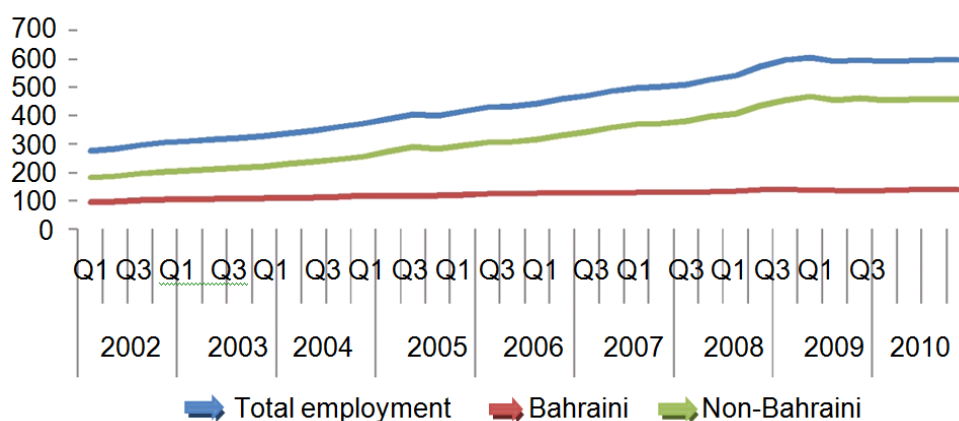
The first discovery of petroleum in the Persian Gulf was in Bahrain in 1932. This led to continued prosperity and an independent source of income as the country began to strengthen its position against potential challenges. It developed modern infrastructure and acquired much strategic and commercial importance. The recent upheaval in Bahrain then, has some long term implications for the economy and creates uncertainty for external forces as well. This needs to be elaborated through some fact based analysis. Bahrain’s GDP growth fell drastically in 2009, improved slightly in the next year, before falling to the 2009 level with an increase in the level of inflation.

Table 1.1. Bahrain country report:

	2008	2009	2010	2011
GDP Growth	6.3%	3.1%	4.1%	3.1%
Inflation	3.5%	2.8%	2%	3%

Source: Global Finance²²

Table 1.2. Employment by Nationality Persons:
Thousands

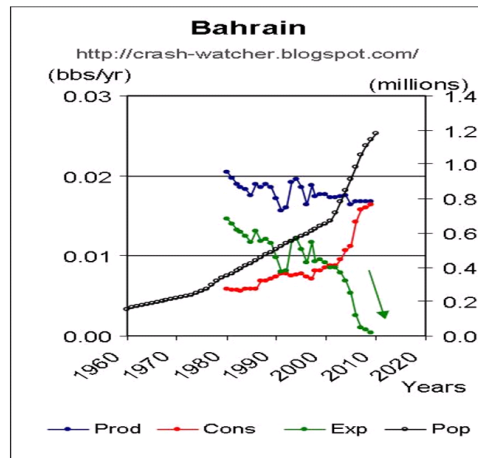


Source: Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA)²³

Compared to indigenous Bahrainis, the employment rate for non-Bahrainis is more progressive. The levels of unemployment and underemployment have been disproportionately higher for the locals as well. Countering this disparity is likely to be a difficult challenge in any reform process.

Moreover, in a tremendously growing population, 27 percent is under the age of fourteen and about five thousand new non-Bahraini nationals enter the labour market every year.²⁴ Thus, more employment sources are required to meet future goals as Bahrain needs to provide three times more jobs than in the past.²⁵ Bahrain has the lowest oil reserves of the Gulf states, producing 35,000 barrels of crude oil daily. It has however, diversified its economy through financial and banking services. Yet, the economic situation remains bleak. The graph below shows that consumption in the country is rapidly increasing even as production and

exports decline.²⁶ Bahrain is about to join the rank of importers in the region as it moves towards a net figure of zero exports.

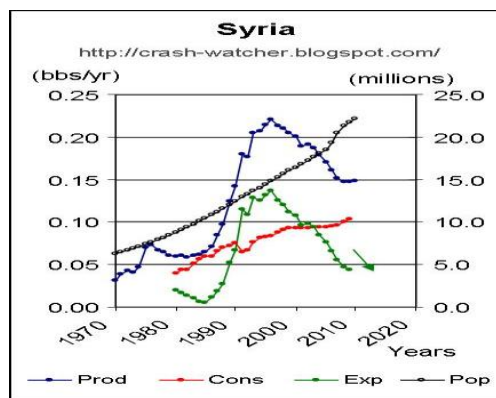


Source: <http://crash-watcher.blogspot.com/2011/02/survey-of-oil-exports-from-middle-east.htm>

It is speculated that “at current rates of production (35,000 barrels per day of crude oil), Bahrain’s on shore oil reserves will be exhausted in 15 years.”²⁷ Bahrain is a poor country and wealth is concentrated only in the influential circles; in the words of one analyst, “I’ve never seen wretched poverty like I’ve seen in Bahrain.”²⁸

Syria

Syria has long term economic constraints, including unemployment, increasing pressure on water supplies and a large budget deficit.



Source: <http://crash-watcher.blogspot.com/2011/02/survey-of-oil-exports-from-middle-east.htm>

The graph shows that oil production in Syria has finally stabilized after years and its consumption is increasing.²⁹ Moreover, Syria is also experiencing declining export trends. The growing gap between the rich and poor is rapidly deepening. The reality of this division could be found easily by establishing the position of poor and rich life within Syria. According to a report by State Planning Commission in collaboration with United Nations Development Programme,

The overall poverty is widespread in Syria which affects 33.6% of country's total population which means that 6.7 million of Syrians are considered poor within this group 12.3% of population (2.4 million people) are considered to be living in extreme poverty or below poverty line.³⁰

The rate of poverty is rising very quickly in rural areas, where most of the poverty-stricken population already resides. This gap between the rich and poor is the result of policies mainly driven by illegal and greedy means in the past five decades. These include the taking of bribes and commissions as well as other aspects of petty corruption as well as the plundering of public funds.

Water sources are controlled by neighboring states and impact poverty in most provinces. Oil resources cover daily governmental expenditures and have a profound influence on the economic conditions of the country as 'this rapidly vanishing resource has kept Syria's economy healthy on a macroeconomic level since 1990s.'

Syria has limited resources compared to other oil states, and has little area suitable for agriculture. Water sources are controlled by neighboring states and impact poverty in most provinces. Oil resources cover daily governmental expenditures and have a profound influence on the economic conditions of the country as 'this rapidly vanishing resource has kept Syria's economy healthy on a macroeconomic level since 1990s.'³¹

An unprecedented water crisis is also a big issue in protests in eastern Syria as water is a precious commodity in the region; Daraa city is home to thousands of people who have been displaced because of the unavailability of water in the last few years. This has led to deteriorating living standards in many parts of the country. Daraa is particularly affected however, since it is 'home to thousands of the displaced people

from eastern Syria, where up to a million people have left their home because of water crisis in the past six years.^{'32} The Golan Heights and mountains that were captured by Israel are valuable resources and water agreements on this front can be very helpful.

Moreover, the labour market is inadequate and the unemployment rate among the young urban population is high. This is the result of a growing population, which has also led to increased inflation. There are other obvious factors too as 'the reason behind the increase in prices was a speculative real estate boom and the partial removal of common government subsidies [and] both factors contributed heavily to inflation which impacts the poor more than it impacts the rich.'³³ Policies have also failed since poverty targets have not been met by the country's tenth five-year plan.

International response to the revolts

The international response to the unrest in Bahrain and Syria has been quite different from the overall response to the Middle East protests and makes for some interesting observations. The persistent U.S. stance has been that violence is not the answer to any problem. However, 'the U.S. position - in particular not calling for the Al Khalifa monarchy to come to an end - may reflect concern among U.S. officials about the consequences were the regime to fall.'³⁴

While Iran criticizes the crackdowns in Bahrain and Syria, the U.S. and European stance, particularly on Syria, has been disappointing. There is no call for the ruling party to step down and there are still hopes for a commitment to reforms. The International Crisis Group, in response to the Syrian crisis, has recommended that

President Assad must show visible leadership and do so now. His political capital today depends less on his past foreign policy successes than on his ability to live up to popular expectations at time of dangerous domestic crisis...³⁵

The U.S. Secretary of State rejected intervention in Syria and there are many factors behind such a decision. Syria is not as easy to target as Libya may be, firstly, because of its arms capability, and secondly since the international community is hoping against hope for a peaceful resolution. This is symbolized for instance by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's call to Al-Assad on April 6 to 'voice support for the latter's decisions to make reforms in his country.'³⁶

Bahrain-Pakistan

Bahrain and Pakistan have maintained good relations based on the notion of cordial brotherhood. Pakistan is a source of agriculture and dairy products for Bahrain but trade ties need to be boosted substantially due to a rapidly changing economic scenario. Defence cooperation is also quite strong as Pakistan desires stability and peace in Bahrain since it 'highly values its relations with the brotherly Muslim country' and hopes for 'further enhancing relations.'³⁷

Syria-Pakistan

Pakistan maintains healthy relations with the people of Syria, a country where many Pakistanis go for business. But both states should try to strengthen governmental relations. This does not mean that the Syria-Pakistan relations are poor; however, significant improvements can be made. A long standing relationship depends on a high volume of trade and both states have to formulate policies based on national security and interests in order to be forward looking and hence ignore minor issues of the past.

Analysis

With strict government controls on religious practices and state-financed and owned institutions, including community centers and mosques, Bahrain and Syria were ripe for popular uprisings. This is since laws that restrict freedoms and rights are now viewed by people as destructive to national harmony as they give unrestricted power to ruling elites. Moreover, thousands of the Bahrainis are denied proper housing and have no political freedoms. Reports on Bahrain are quite divided; however, the disruptions are widespread and there are clear setbacks in economic growth as the country struggles to see itself through multiple challenges.

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Violent rhetoric in any state is often buttressed by different conspiracy theories that tend to exaggerate and distort reality. This has happened in Bahrain where I believe that the sectarian dimension is exaggerated; the basic indicator here is a breakdown in communication. There are other factors that have also fueled protests. The most significant of these is economic pressures, mostly to do with oil prices, demand and supply.

Indeed, Bahrain is facing genuine social and economic problems. There is rising unemployment and inflation and new entrants in the market are causing further concerns. It is a mistake to see the issue only through the prism of sectarianism as this does not address factors that demand a change in the political system. This is important since, for Bahrain, the security and political climate is directly related to its economic conditions.

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Both Bahrain and Syria depend on declining oil resources for revenue. However, the standard of living in Syria is much lower than in Bahrain, where there are far fewer people living below the poverty line. The aforementioned economic indicators merely gave an idea of the existing gap between the rich and poor in Syria. The circumstances for the average man are much worse as the rich are favoured in policies of governmental authorities and have available better services and opportunities. There are ambiguities in defining poverty that include establishing its exact dimensions, identifying rural and urban issues, looking at livelihoods and families, and also focusing on issues of individuals and gender. The lack of clarity in the process makes it difficult to create policies that mitigate the problem. Indeed, despite numerous projects and policies, poverty levels have not changed and the issue has created a chronic disability.

Syria is officially a republic but an authoritarian regime depicting a democratic system in reality. Although people vote for parliament members and the president, they cannot change their government. The president and seniors in the services make decisions with limited public accountability while political opposition against the president is not tolerated. The long term survival of the Assad regime is the result of its strong desire for stability and giving a stake to minorities in the society.

Syria is facing a number of socioeconomic and demographic challenges. Similar to other Middle Eastern states, Syria has many ancient sects but ethnic and religious groups are held together by the central government, which has been attempting to neutralize power groups in order to prevent upheavals.

Conclusion

Most states have constitutions that lead to laws; however, it is important to have them accepted by the people, who ultimately are the basic source of legitimacy. If unilaterally imposed by the ruling power without allowing public participation, laws will always fail. The Shia in Bahrain, for instance, are not calling for a Shia Islamic state, but rather demanding a democratic state in which everyone participates freely, and for the creation of a more empowered and representative parliament.

The chasm between rich and poor lends an identity, status and role in the public life to both the groups in Syria. Thus, any attempt for the promotion of equality and participation begins by combating phenomena that prevent equality. This may indeed be called a revolution of the poor.

Syria is in the centre of a dense Middle East network of relations, and sustained unrest will have an impact on the regional power structure. There are clear signs from the current conflict that economic concerns have replaced territorial issues. The lesson from the Arab revolt primarily for authoritarians around the world is that their quest for power will only hasten their demise unless they grant democracy to their people. As we are taught from the Holy Quran,

The blame is only upon those who oppress men with wrongdoing and insolently transgress beyond bounds through the land, defying right and justice: for such there will be a penalty grievous.³⁸

Implications

There are number of regional and international implications from the uprisings in the Arab world, particularly in Bahrain and Syria, which have been the focus of this paper.

- Bahrain and Syria are strategically important; there are long and short term implications since the collapse of their regimes could have effects also on neighbouring states.

- The unrest may impact emerging markets as investment opportunities go beyond boundaries, and hence affect companies from all over the world that have established businesses in the region.
- The political upheaval in the region could cause a paradigmatic shift in the supply and pricing of energy resources.

Recommendations

Bahrain

- **Reintroduce publication and press law**
The ruling power and legislator should reintroduce the revised press and publication law to practically bring freedom of expression and public opinion.
- **Granting citizenship**
The government should follow international procedures by ending discrimination and granting citizenship to all who qualify based on set standards.
- **End of violence**
The government should take steps to restrict the use of force against public protestors.
- **Abandon restrictions on religious practices**
The government should abandon restrictions on Friday sermons and on religious schools.
- **Rebuilding trust in reforms**
There is a need to build trust between social and political parties through reforms as many believe that they have failed to provide the expected security.
- **Review of political discourse**
All the religious, political and human rights institutions should review their political discourse and aim for working in the interest of the country and for social unity.
- **Constitutional crises**
The constitutional crises in Bahrain need to be addressed as they prevent work on reform processes.
- **Confidence building Steps**
Immediate steps are required for genuine confidence building after a brutal crackdown that has led to many cleavages in society.

Syria

- **Policies to tackle poverty**
The government should frame realistic policies to tackle poverty, which is trapping a number of people especially in the rural areas.

- **Political will**
The complex issue of poverty can only be solved if authorities and policy makers show necessary political will to tackle important problems.
- **Expand investment & use resources effectively**
The effective use of resources and bringing in investment could contribute much towards alleviating poverty.
- **Raising worker productivity**
The government should follow policies to generate job opportunities and increase worker productivity if it is to lower the inflation rate in the country.
- **Restructure economy without oil revenues**
As oil resources are vanishing rapidly, the government should restructure its economy without oil revenues that currently cover a large part of its expenditures.

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