

Assurances may get Saleh a US visa

Washington: Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh will be allowed to enter the US for medical treatment subject to certain assurances, two US administration officials said on Monday. The conditions, that include his itinerary, have not been submitted to US' embassy in Yemen, the officials added and said that no visa has been issued for the president. Officials are wary of providing safe passage for the embattled president who was responsible for a violent crackdown on dissidents in Yemen.

Monitors in, tanks out in Syria's Homs

Beirut: At least 20,000 people protested in Homs on Tuesday against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as Arab League peace monitors began to tour the flashpoint city and the army withdrew some tanks following battles that killed 34 people. The observers want to determine if Assad is keeping his promise to implement a peace plan to end his uncompromising crackdown on nine months of revolt that has generated an armed uprising, edging the country towards civil war.

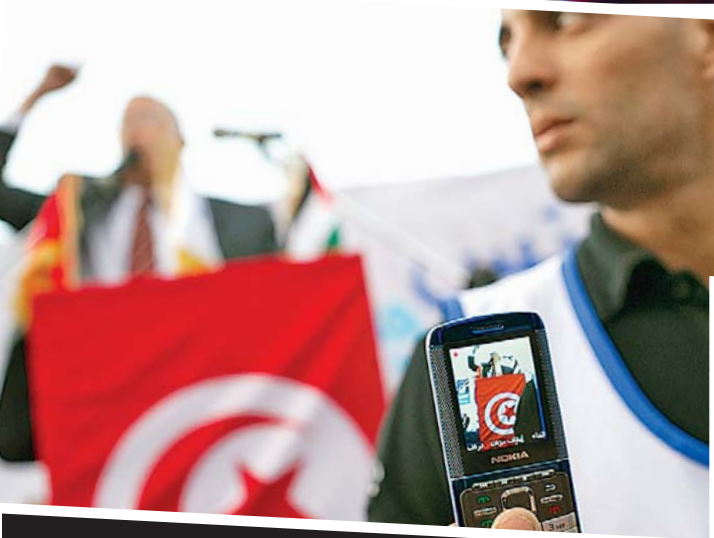
Zardari vows defiance as crises mount

Islamabad: President Asif Ali Zardari used the fourth anniversary of the death of his wife Benazir Bhutto to ensure supporters he would not resign in the face of numerous crises building around him. In a job at the Supreme Court, which is considering an investigation into a memo asking the US for help against the country's powerful military and which could implicate Zardari, he asked about the as yet unsolved case of his wife's assassination.

Man stabbed to death on Oxford Street

London: Police on Tuesday investigated the fatal stabbing of a man during post-Christmas sales on Oxford Street, in an incident that has renewed fears about gang violence. Scotland Yard said they had arrested 11 people after the 18-year-old was killed on Monday. A further three people were detained after a second non-fatal stabbing nearby just hours later.

The Middle East has seen twelve months of catharsis, but Kamilla Lahrichi finds that it is still no country for its many women



(Clockwise from above) Protesters display the colours of Libya, Yemen and Syria flags on their hands; a woman cries in Tahrir Square after it was announced that Hosni Mubarak was giving up power; a woman prays as thousands of Moroccans rally against the regime; a Tunisian records a video of the Islamist En-Nahda party's spokesman, two days before a historic election in Tunisia; a woman with her face painted in the colours of the Kingdom of Libya —AFP/Getty/Reuters

Arab Spring

the Storm after the Storm

While working as a news editor in Beirut, I once had to pick a picture that illustrated Yemeni desperation in the face of former President Abdullah Saleh refusing to step down. The date was February 2011 and the occasion a Friday prayer. I was torn between an image that featured a crowd of women clothed in abayas, weeping as they knelt down, raising their hands to implore the Lord's mercy at a mosque. The other picture focused on just one man who was shedding a few tears in a blurred background of people.

When I asked a fellow Lebanese journalist for advice, he immediately suggested that I select the latter. He contended that since Arab women are extremely emotional, it is common to see them cry. The sight of an Arab male weeping is more powerful. Even though his comment was just meant to underline a predominant cultural trait, it disturbed me somehow. I realise now that for a woman in particular, witnessing the Muslim world change can be deeply inspiring. It debunks the stereotypical image of the subservient Arab female, but more importantly it subverts the notion of an apathetic Arab world.

During the Arab Spring, women have upturned their traditional status in highly patriarchal societies. They have faced the violence of tear gas in their struggle for freedom. They have come into the limelight when Yemeni journalist and activist Tawakkol Karman won the Nobel Peace Prize. Across North Africa and the Middle East, protesters have rewritten the history of the past century. The way that the Chinese have imposed themselves on the international stage after a century of humiliation, Arabs have gained prominence worldwide as they proved that they were a highly politicised people.

What fascinated me as I covered the Arab revolutions was the intensity of varied emotions people expressed. It was easy to sense the deep ire Egyptians felt for the Old Guard. Coverage of Libyans burning Gaddafi's Green Book emphasised their unshakable commitment to revolt and change. Despite crackdowns by Assad's military forces, Syrians have been impressively steadfast and fearless. And the idealistic Moroccans have perhaps been the most pragmatic of all protesters. When I participated in the February 20 (anti-government) demonstrations in the suburb of Sidi Maarouf near Casablanca just a few weeks before the November 2011 electoral turning point, I was impressed by their enthusiasm. As protesters were shouting, "They live in palaces and we dig graves", I sensed that these people were deeply fearful of chaos. Thus, they carefully formulated their demands and ensured not to mention any overthrow of the regime.

But despite these displays of brave unity, women have clearly not earned the same status as men in protests. I find deplorable the instances of sexual assaults to crush women or just harass them, such as CBS correspondent Lara Logan's public rape by Egyptians. I can honestly say that I could have had troubles in Tahrir Square if I was not walking around with a male friend. I even had to slap an Egyptian demonstrator after he touched me inappropriately. Arab men are clearly not accustomed to women playing a public role.

But there is a larger tragedy. Disappointment has unexpectedly followed the thrill. What started as a secular movement has

now triggered Islamic electoral landslides in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. Libya may also have the same fate. Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, the Arab Spring's young initiators have had no clear political structure and have enabled organised Islamist factions to fill the vacuum.

When I attended a weekly brainstorming gathering of Morocco's February 20 movement at the headquarters of the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) in Casablanca, I grasped the protesters' frustration. These students and young professionals were genuinely willing to reform their country, but clearly lacked the skills to do so. Indeed, how could one expect a university student of economics to organise nationwide sit-ins?

For example, there was no coordination between demonstrators in different Moroccan cities, despite the fact that they were often communicating through social media and blogs. In addition, official media denied these people's existence by refusing to cover the protests. Such factors contributed to the momentum Islamists gained. I actually saw many of them distributing tracts in the streets during protests to encourage citizens to vote for an Islamic party. The argument being that it provides an effective platform for reform.

Moreover, these religious groups have found legitimacy thanks to their political virginity, after Arab governments muzzled them for years. In a coffee place across Tahrir Square in Cairo, I discussed with a local journalist the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. As he put it, the Brotherhood did not want to be identified with the protesters at the start of the uprising. Yet, after the demonstrators did the 'dirty job' of organising protests across the country, Islamists progressively infiltrated the scene.

For my part, I am wary of the outcome of Islamic electoral victories. Let us remember that the reason why Arab women suffer from discriminatory legislation such as "guardianship laws" and have the status of minors is, first and foremost, because of the application of Islamic laws — the Sharia. Hence, I do not see how the rise of Islamist parties will, in any way, improve Arab women's fate or encourage democracy.

After being on a pedestal during the Arab Spring, women might now receive far less public attention, especially in Egypt where hardliner Salafists, who aim at implementing a purist interpretation of Islam, have won 20% of the second-round vote. For instance, the committee to redraft Egypt's new constitution after Mubarak's ouster excluded women, even female legal experts. In Tunisia, which pioneered a 1956 law granting women full equality with men in terms of marriage, divorce and child custody, En-Nahda organised sit-ins in rural areas where women were separated from men for the first time.

When I talked to Tunisian expatriates in France, they all agreed that the number of veiled women has sharply increased in Tunisia's streets since Ben Ali was toppled. It is a pity that in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, morality is being favoured over emancipation.

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REVOLUTIONS

at the push of a BUTTON

Ramananda Sengupta

Your next tweet could start a revolution. If 2010 is remembered for the way Julian Assange and his WikiLeaks seriously embarrassed Washington — and several other capitals — by releasing classified diplomatic cables online, 2011 will be remembered for the Arab Spring, which has overthrown three regimes so far, and rattled many more.

The 'Arab Spring' was actually sparked off in the winter of 2010 in Sidi Bouzeid, Tunisia, after street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself ablaze to protest against government harassment and apathy. He died on January 4. An unprecedented wave of nationwide protests forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had been in power for 23 years, to flee to Saudi Arabia and send in his resignation.

This surprising and sudden victory inspired copycat immolations and massive protests in nearby Egypt, that led to the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for nearly 30 years. Similar protests in Libya, this time endorsed and supported by the West, led to a civil war in the country, which is sandwiched between Egypt and Tunisia. A defiant Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, who ruled that nation for 42 years, was finally captured, tortured and killed by rebels on October 20. Major public protests were also reported from Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Jordan, Kuwait, Iran and the tiny gulf Sultanate of Oman.

Social media, in the form of Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, among others, played a crucial role in this revolution that is still sweeping across many parts of Northern Africa and the Middle East. Yet barely 20% of the Tunisian population had access to the Internet, which in turn was heavily censored. A similar situation prevails in most of the other nations on that list.

How does one reconcile this apparent contradiction? Simple. While social media helped people organise themselves rapidly and effectively, like in the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square, cell phones and television played the role of a powerful and critical force multiplier. In fact, attempts to shut down the internet in some of these nations probably led many people, who would otherwise have been content to stay behind their computer screens, to actually join the protests in real time. In Tunisia, for example, a lot of the protesters came out on the streets only after the government tried to block access to Facebook, Youtube and Twitter.

The Internet, particularly social media, has always been a powerful political tool. Today, it has become a game changer, feared by repressive regimes not just in the Arab lands, but places like China, Africa and even some democratic nations in the 'Free World'. Attempts to curtail access, as in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, only made things worse.

"By blocking all communication networks in Egypt on the night of January 27, including internet and mobile phones access, the Egyptian regime committed his biggest mistake," says Wael Ghonim, former Google marketing head for the region and an activist who became the poster boy for the Egyptian revolution.

"He (the regime/Mubarak) forced thousands of pro-democracy activists who were following what is happening behind their monitors till that moment to go downtown to Tahrir square to see what is really happening; they helped us unwillingly to increase our numbers."

Angered over the brutal torture and murder of Khaled Said — a young Egyptian who had put up a video on Youtube showing a senior Egyptian police officer selling drugs from a police station — Ghonim put up a Facebook page titled 'We are all Khaled Said'. The page became an instant hit, and was used to organise the first protests in Tahrir Square.

"This 'Arab Spring' is not about traditional political actors like unions, political parties or radical fundamentalists," says Professor Philip N Howard, Director of Project on Information Technology and Political Islam at the University of Washington. "It has drawn networks of people, many of whom have not been political before: young entrepreneurs, government workers, the urban middle class."

"Civil society networks, through Twitter, Facebook and mobile phones, connect social networks across North Africa and the Middle East. These are the networks that are passing a cascading message of fatigue with authoritarian rule across the region. These are the networks that have pulled out such large numbers into Tahrir Square," argues Dr Howard.

Events like the Arab Spring, he concludes, are "early signs of the next big wave of democratisation. But this time, it will be wrestled into life in the digital living room of the global community".

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A shop in Tahrir Square is spray-painted after internet access was shut off by the government in Cairo —Getty