

Looking Back at 2011

Written by Sujay Ghosh

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SUJAY GHOSH, DEC 28 2018

Any historical episode is about a particular set of events which makes the idea of 'time' as an interesting subject. Wars, liberation of colonised countries, various waves of democratisation – they conjure up the images of epoch-making changes, referring to particular time-periods. though considered as a 'recent past', the year of 2011 in future may also be remembered as an important 'time' in the history of democracy – it sparked the impulses for democratisation at various parts of the world. Democratisation conceives the process of achieving or deepening democracy which may be manifest in various ways: ideas, impulse, actions, movements, institution-building and more. As we approach towards the end of the decade, it is the time to have an assessment of those events: , the vision may have remained unfulfilled or partially fulfilled, but shall remain forever.

Precisely, *three* events happened in 2011, which unplugged people's pent-up anger with corruption and other abuses of power. The first one is Arab Spring: having started from a local area finally engulfed much of the Arab world and heralded the demand for democracy. The second one happened in May 2011 in the state of West Bengal in India, when people voted the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] out of power after 34 years. The third one also occurred in India, when young people across many cities have taken to streets, protesting against corruption. These events thus have raised issues that challenged the notions of democracy: it must address freedom and corruption meaningfully. thus, the events that unfolded made 2011 as an interesting time-period.

First, the Arab Spring: it started in Tunisia – in December 2010, a street vendor committed self-immolation, protesting against humiliation arising from police high handedness. Although such incidents take place in many parts of the developing world almost regularly, this incident was videographed and uploaded into social media. It unplugged a series of protests in many parts of the Arab world in the first few months of 2011. Many old regimes and dictators collapsed, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya; whereas some others like the kingdoms in Morocco and Saudi Arabia initiated reforms to varying degrees. Optimists predicted the arrival of 'fourth wave' of democratisation.

With the passage of time however, that optimism had largely faded away. The endeavour for democratisation has ultimately started and ended in Tunisia only: it made some progress in consolidating democracy. Egypt was soon thrown into utter chaos for years and only recently the regime has stabilised partially. Syria became the epicentre of a global crisis. Both in Egypt and Syria, democrats initiated the reforms, but were unable to retain control – it was appropriated by fundamentalist hardliners.

In terms of magnitude, the other two incidents are just ripples compared to the storm of Arab Spring. Electoral changes of regimes are routine part of democratic exercise, but the CPI(M)-dominated Left Front government in West Bengal, looked virtually invincible in successive elections since 1977. The opposition, in terms of organisational strength, discipline and ideological appeal, were no match for them for most of the period. However, oppositional challenges were taking shape since the rise of Trinamul Congress (TMC) in 1998, which articulated protests against economic stagnation, party's stranglehold over society (known as 'partyocracy'), the shrinkage of democratic space and a generally overbearing and oppressive regime. Since 2007 onwards, particularly after the Nandigram massacre, TMC appeared to challenge the CPI(M) convincingly. This was followed by several incidents of political violence. Finally, in May 2011 elections, the Left Front government was voted out. In the subsequent elections, their fortunes dipped steadily: the embarrassment deepened further when their nomination amount was forfeited many times for severely low scoring polling-tallies.

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However, things have not dramatically improved since then. Although infrastructural facilities have improved in West Bengal, there has not been significant improvement in the industrial scenario. The all-powerful and overbearing 'party office' of CPI(M) does no longer scare people, but political violence along partisan lines does continue, including factional infighting; law and order situation also does not inspire much confidence. Like the previous regime, the polarisation of votes in the favour of ruling party continues and no credible opposition appears in sight.

The third one captures civil society's initiatives for democratisation, while protesting against corruption. It started when the government's version of Lokpal Bill was tabled in the Parliament: activists suspected that the Bill that was presented there was a much diluted version intended to blunt the edge of taking action against corruption at high places. The movement started in India's capital, New Delhi, but soon had spread into other cities like Mumbai and Bangalore. A youth's group – India against Corruption– came into being and they made various creative efforts to sensitise people on corruption. However, ultimately the government's version prevailed; and according to Transparency International reports, published annually, India still performs poorly on corruption.

Thus, 2011 represents a moment in history, which encapsulated the impulse for achieving or enriching democracy – in the context of developing world, 2011 is the time when various dimensions of democracy demanded our attention. The hopes of that this time-period raised are fulfilled only partially, but they drive home some important messages. Impulse for democracy is certainly very important for starting the process of democratisation, but for consolidation democracy, two further factors are crucial: *preparation* and *leadership*. Democratisation is an extremely complex process, with many twists and turns – both anticipated and sudden; therefore, democratisation needs sufficient preparation for consolidating democratic *processes and practices*, as the success of Tunisia shows. Democracy activism included the creation of space for mutual dialogue in Tunisian civil society long before the Arab Spring. As a result, transition process was mostly successful. Other Arab countries lacked that preparation; to a certain extent, there was also lack of preparation in West Bengal and the anti-corruption movements. Still, in West Bengal, the leadership could ably transform people's anger into a successful regime change. In the case of anti-corruption movements, cleavages among the top leadership were visible from the beginning.

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