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MIDDLE EAST THIS YEAR

Lebanon: a new government after 13 months

Rashmi Ramesh, 12 September 2021

What happened?

On 10 September, Lebanon's presidency announced the formation of a new government under the leadership of Najib Mikati, a former Prime Minister who has previously held the position twice. PM Mikati and President Michael Aoun signed a government decree regarding the formation, in the presence of Speaker Nabih Berri. The announcement ended a 13-month stalemate and a complex political crisis.

Addressing the press, Mikati stated that "the situation is very difficult. But it is not impossible if we unite as Lebanese. We have to put our hands together...work together, united with hope and determination." Welcoming the announcement, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged the new government to "implement a tangible reform agenda" in accordance with the aspirations of the people. France, an important stakeholder in Lebanon, welcomed the new government, and President Emmanuel Macron said that it is "vital that Lebanon's politicians stuck to engagements necessary to undertake key reforms."

What is the background?

First, the political crisis. The massive blast at the Beirut port opened the floodgates of an impending political crisis in Lebanon. On 4 August 2020, Beirut witnessed a major blast at the port, killing more than 200 people and injuring thousands. The incident triggered massive protests on the streets demanding action and justice. Owning responsibility, PM Hassan Diab resigned. With his resignation, the politicians failed to arrive at a consensus and put forth a stable political solution. Former PM Saad Hariri too, failed to form the government, stating differences with President Aoun. Najib Mikati's appointment as the PM-designate came in the backdrop of Hariri's resignation. The new government brings an end to the 13-month deadlock.

Second, the international pressure. France, the former colonizer, took a special interest in the political crisis of Lebanon and exerted immense pressure on the political elite to form a government. The US too joined the exercise. The overwhelming international and regional pressure to find a solution to the crisis is said to be one of the key reasons for the recent development. It must be noted that the presence of legitimate authority is extremely crucial for negotiating with the IMF and preventing Lebanon from a free fall.

Third, the crippling economic crisis. Lebanon is reeling under a severe economic crisis. Chaotic economic policies, extensive deficit expenditure, and mismanaged monetary policies have proved disastrous. The Lebanon Economic Monitor released by the World Bank in May 2021, concluded that the country's economic situation may be one of the worst crises in over 150 years.

Fourth, social fallout of the crisis. With the virtual absence of a functioning government for more than a year, the Lebanese society is suffering from the health system breakdown and pandemic, long hours of blackout, fuel shortages, unaffordable inflation and consequential poverty. According to the UN, three-quarters of the population lives in poverty.

What does it mean?

First, a fresh start. Barring the two Christian parties, Mikati has the support of almost all the political outfits including Sunni, Shia and Druze parties. The newly formed cabinet is a fresh beginning, with some new faces, technocrats and specialists, nevertheless endorsed by various political parties. Though there is scepticism about what the cabinet is capable of doing, the fact that there is a full-working government is hope in the right direction. Marking this, the markets displayed optimism and Lebanese currency saw an increase in its value.

Second, a bumpy road. Mikati and his cabinet take over amidst a crippling crisis and have the daunting task of bringing Lebanon on the path to recovery. However, it is not an easy task, as gaining confidence both in the Parliament as well as among the public is important.

Implementing recovery plans together with the Lebanese political class and international actors like France and organizations such as WTO, IMF, requires multiple rounds of negotiation and confidence-building measures.

Lebanon: Appointment of a new PM raises hope for a revival of the economy

Rashmi Ramesh, 1 August 2021

What happened?

On 26 July, Lebanon's President Michael Aoun appointed Najib Mikati as the PM-designate, responsible for forming a new government for a country that has not had a functioning government since the crisis began in 2019. Mikati is a former two-time Prime Minister and one of the most successful business tycoons in the country. His appointment comes in the backdrop of Saad Hariri's resignation, citing differences with the President and accepting his failure to form a government. Post his appointment, Mikati stated: "alone I do not have a magic wand to achieve miracles. We are in a very difficult situation... it is a difficult mission that can succeed only if we all work together."

On 30 July, The European Union adopted a legal framework to impose sanctions on the Lebanese political elite, officials, and entities, for lack of governance and economic crisis.

What is the background?

First, the political crisis. Failing economic policies clubbed with political instability has pushed Lebanon into a war-like situation in the absence of war. Since Hassan Diab resigned in August 2020, Lebanon has been facing a political crisis. Lebanese leaders have failed to reach a consensus and provide a stable government. In October 2020, Saad Hariri, a former Prime Minister (2009-2011 and 2016-2020) was appointed as the PM-designate after Diab's resignation. However, he also failed to form a government, due to differences with President Michael Aoun and Hezbollah's role in cabinet formation. Hariri resigned in July 2021.

Najib Mikati's appointment comes in the above background.

Second, Lebanon's political arrangement with multiple power centers. Iran-backed armed political outfit Hezbollah, the Forward Movement, and Shi'ite Amal Movement decide the composition of the government. Alongside, the two Christian majority parties- the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces hold considerable sway in the system. Lebanon's political structure may also be a reason for the diverging interests that are evident currently. The Lebanese National Pact of 1943 provides for a Maronite Christian President, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shi'ite Speaker for the National Assembly.

Third, the economic crisis. The Lebanese economic policy has been chaotic due to extensive deficit expenditure, and unsustainable mismanaged monetary policies. The GDP and per capita income fell by 40 per cent in 2020, pushing half the population into poverty. The Lebanon Economic Monitor released by the World Bank in May 2021, concluded that the country's economic situation might be one of the worst crises in over 150 years. Marking the anniversary of the Beirut blast, France will hold an international donor conference along with the UN in August, to raise funds for the deteriorating situation in Lebanon.

Fourth, the trigger and the protests. On 4 August 2020, Beirut witnessed a major blast at the port, killing more than 200 people and injuring thousands. The incident has left a trail of destruction in the capital city, and triggered massive protests on the streets demanding action and justice. Lebanon was in the midst of an economic crisis prior to 2020. However, the pandemic and the blast dealt a severe blow, challenging recovery in every aspect.

Fifth, the protests and related social challenges. Mass protests challenged both the then government and the larger direction in which the country was headed to. UNICEF warned about the impending water crisis, with approximately four million people, including one million refugees are at the risk of losing access to safe

water resources. Additionally, the population suffers from long blackouts, shortage of food, medicines, fuel, and exceptionally high rates of unemployment.

What does it mean?

First, a hope in Najib Mikati. Most of the political parties have announced support for Mikati. Barring the two Christian parties, he has the support of the Sunni, Shia, and Druze politicians, which may pave the way for a government. With optimism in the market, in the form of a slight rise in the value of Lebanese currency against the US Dollar, there is hope in the right direction. He stated that the first priority was to implement the French roadmap for recovery. It must also be noted that Mikati does not hail from a political dynasty unlike other politicians, instead is a successful entrepreneur. Second, a functioning government is a compelling necessity. Mikati is touted to form a government in a time of extreme crisis and is expected to take along the diverging political interests. It is time that the Lebanese political blocs come on the same platform to avoid further free fall of the economy and living conditions.

Lebanon: Deepening political crisis

Udbhav Krishna P, 18 July 2021

What happened?

On 15 July, Lebanon Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri stepped down after failing to form a government over the past eight months. Hariri resigned, following a brief meeting with President Aoun at Baabda Palace. Aoun accused Hariri of having already decided to step down prior to their meeting. According to Al Jazeera, the President's office said, "Hariri rejected any amendments related to changes in ministries, their sectarian distribution, and the names associated with them."

On the same day, during an interview with Lebanon's Al Jadeed TV, Hariri said he selected his candidates based on their expertise and their ability to reform the economy, but Aoun did not. Following Hariri's step down, his supporters

took to the street and there were few clashes with Lebanese soldiers. The Lebanese pound hit a new all-time low exceeding USD 21,000. Reuters reported: French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Lebanese leaders seemed unable to find a solution to the crisis that they had created, calling the failure to form a cabinet another terrible incident. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Hariri's decision was "disappointing" and urged Lebanese leaders to put aside their differences and form a government.

What is the background?

First, Lebanon's unique power-sharing system. Different sects share and allocate key political and security offices. The president is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. Hariri, a former prime minister, and Lebanon's leading Sunni Muslim politician, was designated in October to assemble a government following the resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab's cabinet in the wake of the Beirut port explosion. Hariri is the most influential Sunni politician in Lebanon and has the support of the Lebanese Sunni religious establishment. Although support from Sunni-led Saudi Arabia waned in recent years, he still has backing from other Sunni Arab-led states like Egypt.

Second, the internal political deadlock. Hariri's decision to step down marks the culmination of months of conflict over cabinet posts between him and Aoun, the Maronite Christian head of state. The latter is allied with the Iran-backed Shi'ite Muslim group Hezbollah. According to the Al Jazeera report, on 14 July, Hariri proposed a 24-minister government, which according to local media, gave Aoun eight ministers, including the defense and foreign ministries. Hariri has been at odds with Aoun over the size and distribution of a new government. Aoun has accused Hariri's proposal of lacking Christian representation and dismissing the country's sectarian-based power-sharing system, while Hariri has accused Aoun of wanting too large of a share in the government.

Third, the economic crisis. The World Bank has described Lebanon's depression as one of the sharpest in modern history. The currency has lost more than 90 per cent of its value in two years; poverty has spread, and there have been crippling fuel shortages, prompting growing fears of social unrest. The economic freefall is Lebanon's worst crisis since the 1975-90 civil war.

Fourth, the external pressure. There have been sanctions by European Union on Lebanese officials preventing a new government from taking power. The international community has urged Lebanese officials to settle political differences and put together a government that would enact economic reforms to unlock billions of dollars in aid and make the economy viable again.

What does it mean?

Prime Minister Hassan Diab is staying in a caretaker capacity. A parliamentary election is due to be held next May; some believe the political vacuum will continue till then. With no candidate in place to replace Hariri, Lebanon's sectarian-based political system has been thrust into a period of further uncertainty. The continuation of a political vacuum will also impact Lebanon's ability to bring international aid to manage economy.

Lebanon: Protestors' return demanding resolution of political and economic crises

Dincy Adlakha, 21 March 2021

What happened?

On 15 and 16 March, protestors returned to the streets. The recent agitation arose as the Lebanese Pound broke the economy and hit a record low. The currency has lost more than 85 per cent of its value since 2019. The protestors blocked significant cities in the country like Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon by burning tires.

On 17 March, the Central Bank of Lebanon received a letter from the EU, UN, and World Bank promising to provide aid to the bleeding country in US Dollars. Before the

announcement, the aid was delivered in Lebanese currency; since it crashed, the aid will be provided in hard currency. Although no comments were made by the Lebanese diplomats, various Human Rights groups and urged the parties to create a mechanism for aid to be transferred to the people directly.

On the same day, Lebanese President Aoun met the PM-designate Hariri to discuss the formation of the government. The President was hasty and stern in suggesting Hariri either form the government quickly or step aside from the political canvas. Hariri mentioned that he aims to keep communications open, which was still the case.

What is the background?

First, the deterioration of Lebanon's economy. This has been the case during the recent period, and the massive explosion in the Beirut port in 2020 and COVID-19 have led the economy to a breaking point. Problems of corruption, bankruptcy in every sector and the blow to the banking sector (the only flourishing sector due to unrealistic interests provided) fell apart, leading to Lebanon's downfall. The citizens have been facing food insecurity and electricity black-outs making the situation miserable and harsh.

Second, the nature and composition of the government. The government has provided space to various sects of the country and mandated a Maronite Christian President, a Shia Muslim Speaker of Parliament, and a Sunni Muslim Prime Minister. Established through the 'Taif Agreement' in 1989, it has failed in stabilizing the country's politics. The political crisis deepened since 2019 when PM Hariri stepped down, and the government was dissolved. Internal players from various sects have been unable to come to a consensus and have ignored the economic chaos engulfing Lebanon, rendering the Sectarian form of government ineffectual.

Third, the international players and their involvement. The Saudi-Iran rivalry plays a role in the Lebanon crisis; it has led to alliances being formed within Lebanon that assert themselves with force. The US and Saudi

backed camp has clashed on numerous occasions with the pro-Syrian camp as both hold different views on government formation. The US has been suspicious of Syrian involvement in the 2019 Beirut explosion and the financial crisis of the country.

What does it mean?

The growing tensions in Lebanon can only point to further chaos in the country. The many sects involved in the power struggle may lead the country to a probable civil war. The failure of state institutions is another imminent concern. The formation of government is nowhere in sight leading to a mismanaged system of corruption and downfalls. However, the focus needs to be shifted from power politics to the civilians in the line of danger. Growing humanitarian crisis and loss of dignified life is the only certain card based on current situations.

Iran: A predetermined election results in Ebrahim Raisi becoming the new President

Jeshil J Samuel, 20 June 2021

What happened?

On 16 June, three Presidential candidates decided to withdraw their participation from the elections. Mohsen Mehralizadeh, one of the three candidates, was, unfortunately, the only reformist candidate in the race.

On 18 June, Iran conducted its 13th Presidential elections with an all-time low voter turnout of 48.8 per cent. The election results were announced on 19 June, with ultraconservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi winning the polls with a landslide victory as expected.

What is the background?

First, the recent Presidential elections in Iran. The last Presidential elections in 2017 saw a massive voter turnout of 73.3 per cent and 40 million votes being cast. The competition was also stiff between the then President Rouhani and his rival Ebrahim Raisi, thereby asserting the legitimacy of the elections. Earlier, in the 2013 elections, Rouhani won the race with

securing more than 50 per cent in the first round; this election also witnessed more than 70 per cent of the voters taking part. In 2009, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad got reelected with a record 80 per cent polling and securing more than 60 per cent of the votes.

Second, the 2021 elections and the candidates. On 25 May, Iran's Guardian Council declared the final list of candidates, choosing seven candidates out of the 592 applicants. After three candidates decided to back out, the elections had only four contestants - Ebrahim Raisi, an ultraconservative cleric; Mohsen Rezaei, former commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard; Abdolnaser Hemmati, former head of the Central Bank of Iran; and Amir-Hossein, the deputy speaker of the Iranian parliament. With more than 59 million eligible voters, the elections saw a turnout of 48.8 per cent making it a lowkey election turnout. According to the election results, Raisi has won 62 per cent of the votes, followed by Rezaei with 11.8 per cent. The other candidates, Hemmati and Amir-Hossein, received 8.4 and 3.5 per cent of votes, respectively.

Third, the decline in voting. A row of controversies regarding bias in the Presidential elections began after the Guardian Council released the list of candidates. The Iranian public and the international community started calling the elections rigged as the list did not have a healthy mix of contestants, and most critics found the electoral process to be favouring Ebrahim Raisi. The Iranian public were also frustrated about the worsening economic conditions and the role of non-elected bodies (like the Guardian Council) in suppressing their choices. After three candidates dropped out of the race two days before the elections, the public opinion towards voting worsened. The Iranian public had made up their minds not to vote, knowing the inevitable outcome.

Fourth, the pre-election advantage for Ebrahim Raisi. He has been seen as a protege of the Ayatollah and has also found favour amongst ultranationalists through his father-in-law, the Grand Imam of Imam Reza shrine. The bias

towards Raisi became evident after the state media publicized his contributions and persona more than the other candidates during the election campaigns.

What does it mean?

The electoral processes in Iran would have to change. The Guardian Council, which is not elected by the people, has the power to choose or reject candidates without giving any reason. This unfair screening would reduce the standards and legitimacy of upcoming elections if continued. The Iranian public has already started boycotting regional elections in a quest for a more democratic selection process for future Presidential and Parliamentary candidates.

Iran: Tehran begins producing 60 per cent enriched uranium

Lokendra Sharma, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 16 April, Iran announced producing 60 per cent enriched uranium at its Natanz nuclear facility, two days after the IAEA said that Iran "had almost completed preparations to start producing UF₆ enriched up to 60 per cent U-235".

On 15 April, talks resumed in Vienna between Iran, the US and European partners to salvage the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

On 14 April, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said that 60 per cent enrichment was a response to the alleged Israeli attack on the Natanz plant. France, Germany and the UK called it a "serious development" in a joint statement. The US called the move "provocative" while Saudi Arabia asked Iran to "avoid escalation" and "engage seriously in the current negotiations" in reference to talks happening in Vienna.

Earlier, on 11 April, Iran's Natanz enrichment facility suffered a power blackout, damaging the underground centrifuges. The "sabotage" was widely attributed to Israel, including by Iran's Foreign Minister, who called it an act of "nuclear terrorism".

What is the background?

First, Iran's position on enrichment. Iran has an ambiguous position on enrichment and nuclear weapons. While its official narrative claims that enrichment is not for weapons purposes, its actions say otherwise. Iran had a clandestine nuclear programme in the 1990s and early 2000s (suspended in 2003) despite being an NPT signatory. Post-2003, it has used the rate, quantity and percentage of enrichment both as a symbol of defiance and also as a bargaining chip, especially in the run-up to the JCPOA. Its current production of 60 per cent enriched uranium only takes it closer to the weapons-grade level and, contrary to its claims, is not for civilian purposes.

Second, Iran's nuclear capability. Iran primarily uses first-generation centrifuges (IR-1) at its Natanz enrichment site, even as it has also introduced new-generation centrifuges (IR-5 and IR-6). On 14 April, the IAEA said that Iran would be installing "six additional cascades of IR-1 centrifuges" at Natanz "comprising a total of 1,024 centrifuges". Iran is also developing advanced IR-9 centrifuges, which will be 50 times quicker than IR-1. Even though Iran is currently producing small quantities of 60 per cent enriched uranium, it can ramp it up.

Third, JCPOA and the contentious issue of enrichment. The JCPOA mandated that uranium could only be enriched up to 3.67 per cent and allowed this only at the Natanz enrichment facility with strict IAEA inspections. This was a significant takeaway for the US and the European partners of the JCPOA as this low enriched uranium cannot be used for strategic purposes. However, after former US President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and reimposed crippling sanctions (despite IAEA certified compliance), Iran responded by gradually breaching the nuclear deal. This includes surpassing the 300 kg limit on enriched uranium in May 2019 and enriching uranium up to 20 per cent in January 2021. Enriching uranium up to 60 per cent is the most significant breach of the deal so far. The question of enrichment is also central to the negotiations happening in Vienna currently.

What does it mean?

First, Iran's move to enrich uranium up to 60 per cent is not a surprising one; it has gradually breached the nuclear deal since Trump's withdrawal in 2018. However, the sabotage at the Natanz facility has speeded up the jump from 20 per cent enrichment announced in January 2021 to 60 per cent now.

Second, 60 per cent enrichment has also brought Iran very close to the weapons-grade requirement of 90 per cent and will provide an upper hand to the country in the talks at Vienna. It has to be seen how Israel and Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional foes, respond to this. The possibility of another "sabotage" cannot be discounted at this stage.

Third, irrespective of the developments of the past one week, the talks at Vienna will continue. Instead, there will be more onus on the negotiators in Vienna now to find a peaceful way out of the nuclear quagmire.

Iran: Return of the JCPOA talks

Poornima B, 11 April 2021

What happened?

On 9 April 2021, a Joint Commission meeting of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) members (excluding the United States) was held in Vienna. The meeting followed a virtual and in-person meeting held a few days earlier, resulting in two working groups. One group looks at the US sanctions imposed on Iran; the other will develop conditions that Iran has to comply with to execute the JCPOA. The US representatives stayed at a different hotel as the Iranian delegation refused to meet them directly. Messages about the negotiations were relayed to the US by the other signatories to the JCPOA- Russia, European Union, China.

As the talks' progress, the US and Iran will be involved in indirect talks from the coming week. Iran has expressed its willingness to negotiate provided the US also followed suit. The other parties expect that the negotiations will culminate with a credible outcome that outlines the measures needed to be taken by them to reignite the JCPOA.

What is the background?

First, the JCPOA initiative, as an effort to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. In 2015, President Obama signed the JCPOA to offer sanctions relief to Tehran in exchange to ensure a peaceful Iranian nuclear programme. Under this nuclear deal, Iran agreed to restrict the production of the nuclear material for ten years and dismantle its centrifuges, basically giving up the idea of developing its nuclear weapons. UK, France, China, Russia and Germany (P5+1) were also parties to the deal.

Second, Trump disrupting the progress of the Iran nuclear deal. Trump pulled out of the deal, following criticisms about the deal by the US' close allies - Israel and Saudi Arabia, and citing Iran's aggression in the Middle East. The other parties to the deal opposed Trump's decision; however, he reimposed sanctions on Iran. Tehran began producing nuclear materials, and considerable advancement in Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs was observed.

Third, Iran's response. In December 2020, Iran's Supreme Council passed a nuclear law that directs the state to bolster its nuclear enrichment levels up to 20 per cent Ur-235. Despite President Hassan Rouhani's warning against the consequences of such legislation, the Supreme Council passed it. As of February 2021, Iran had produced 17kg of weapons-grade Uranium.

What does it mean?

First, disagreement over what sanctions to remove could be a potential hurdle for the negotiations. While Iran demands all sanctions imposed after January 2016 be lifted, the US does not want to remove non-nuclear sanctions. Moreover, President Trump had smudged the difference between nuclear and non-nuclear related sanctions by placing some into terrorism-related sanctions. A major challenge for the US delegation would be deciding whether to stick to these designations or look beyond them. The US will also have to convince its allies in the Middle East.

Second, the negotiations have to fructify before the Iran presidential elections in June. If a hardliner replaces Rouhani (who is considered a

moderate), Iran could revisit its negotiations. The deal must see the light for the moderates to retain their face amid widespread call for a hardliner Presidential candidate in Iran. Such political change could delay the talks' outcomes, as opposed to what the other parties aim to achieve.

Iran: The new US offer to restart a dialogue

Rashmi Ramesh, 21 February 2021

What happened?

On 18 February, the United States offered to restart talks with Iran on the JCPOA. The Secretary of State Anthony Blinken held talks with the officials of the European countries that are party to the agreement and stated that the US would return to it formally if Iran treads the path of compliance. The US State Department signalled that Washington was ready to hold “informal talks” with Iran, on the invitation of one of the European countries.

On 19 February, in response, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson tweeted that the country stood firm and would agree to compliance only when the US lifts the sanctions imposed on it by the Trump administration.

What is the background?

First, the new US administration, and a nuanced approach by Biden towards Iran vis-à-vis Trump's hammer strategy. Joe Biden's campaign highlighted the need to reverse Trump's policy on Iran concerning JCPOA. Offering direct talks with Iran is the first step that the Biden administration has taken, towards restoring the JCPOA. However, Biden has also cautioned about restarting the dialogue unless Iran returns to compliance. This is in stark contrast with the previous US administration, which withdrew from the deal in 2018, as part of the maximum pressure policy. Trump imposed a slew of sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy and has taken several steps to curtail its regional influence.

Second, Iran's hardline position and the willingness to address the concerns if the sanctions are removed. Since the US withdrew

from the nuclear deal, Iran has gradually scaled down its commitments to the deal. In December 2020, the Iranian Parliament approved for increasing the uranium enrichment levels to 20 per cent, in a clear breach of the deal. The move came after the assassination of the country's top nuclear scientist Dr Mohsen Fakrizadeh, allegedly by Israel. The moderate cabinet headed by Prime Minister Hassan Rouhani is bound to implement the legislation passed by the hardliner Parliament. The Iranian Parliament Speaker announced in January that Iran has produced 37.5 pounds of 20 per cent enriched uranium at the Fordow nuclear facility. On 8 February, the IAEA reported 3.6 grams of uranium metal at Iran's Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant. On 16 February, Iran informed the IAEA that it “will stop implementing voluntary transparency measures under the JCPOA as of 23 February, including the Additional Protocol.” The Additional Protocol enables the IAEA to conduct inspections of undeclared sites on short notice. The Supreme Leader, in a televised address to the nation, said that the country would not comply with the deal unless the US lifts the sanctions that are crippling the economy.

Third, Europe's concerns regarding instability. The E3 (UK, Germany and France) fear the outcomes of a more hardline stance by Iran, particularly the regional instability. The joint statement that followed the virtual meet of the E3 and the US officials urged “Iran to consider the consequences of such (enrichment) grave action, particularly at this time of renewed diplomatic opportunity.”

What does it mean?

First, an emerging space for diplomacy with Iran. There have been indications of talks and negotiations from the US, E3 and Iran. Both Iran and the US, despite stringent stances, have expressed their willingness to restart talks that are mediated by one of the European countries. The US's formal call for talks will induce a new lease of life to the nuclear deal and the larger question of US-Iran relations.

Second, Biden's policy choices. While there is a significantly large section demanding a more nuanced approach, there are stronger voices

within the US that do not want to soften its stance on Iran. He risks being tagged as a pro-Iran president and angering the US's strong allies in the region- Israel and the Arab countries.

Iran, therefore, is a difficult nut to crack for Joe Biden.

Iran: Tehran announces 20 per cent uranium enrichment as a new US administration takes over

Lokendra Sharma, 9 January 2021

What happened?

On 4 January, the Iranian government's spokesperson said that the country has started enriching uranium up to 20 per cent purity. "The process for producing 20 per cent enriched uranium has started at Shahid Alimohammadi enrichment complex (Fordow)", the statement said.

Earlier, on 1 January, the IAEA released a statement which said: "Iran has informed the Agency that in order to comply with a legal act recently passed by the country's parliament, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran intends to produce low-enriched uranium (LEU) up to 20 per cent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant".

What is the background?

First, the passing of a law mandating enrichment. In early December, the Iranian parliament passed the Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions law which mandates the government to suspend inspections and enrich uranium to 20 per cent from the current 4.5 per cent level. This came after Iran's top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated, for which Iran blamed Israel. It also gave a month's time to European powers to lift the sanctions, failing to adopt the measures.

Second, the all-round failure of the JCPOA. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015 between Iran and the P5 (the US, China, the UK, France and Russia) plus Germany. The deal lifted crippling economic sanctions in return for Iran accepting a set of restrictions on its nuclear programme. The key provisions included: First, limiting the uranium

stockpile under 300 kgs with 3.67 per cent enrichment level for 15 years; second, at the Fordow nuclear site, which is in the limelight now, Iran accepted to introduce no uranium for 15 years; third, to remove the core of the Arak reactor which was considered to be capable of producing plutonium. In 2018, the US President Trump withdrew from the deal and re-imposed sanctions as part of "maximum pressure" on Iran. Even as the IAEA certified Iran's compliance with the deal, other signatories, failed to uphold the provisions of the deal and did not help Iran in addressing the US sanctions.

Third, Iran's breaches of the deal after Trump's withdrawal. In May 2019 Iran announced that it would not observe the 300 kg enriched uranium limit. In July 2019, it announced enriching uranium to 4.5 per cent, overshooting the deal mandated 3.67 per cent. In September 2019 Iran declared starting research on advanced centrifuges. In November 2019 Iran began enriching uranium to 4.5 per cent at Fordow site. In January 2020, Iran said that it is not bound by deal limits, but would maintain with its safeguard applications. The decision to enrich uranium up to 20 per cent purity is the latest breach of the deal.

Fourth, the Middle East's geopolitics. The Israel-US relationship has grown stronger; Israel has signed the Abraham Accords and improved relations with the Arab countries, altering the strategic landscape of the region. Iran's move comes amid this developing Arab-Israeli partnership which is threatening for the former.

What does it mean?

First, there is a pattern to Iran's breaches of the nuclear deal. It has gradually upped the ante, giving ample time to the other signatories of the deal to work around the US sanctions. It has not gone about the breaches secretly; rather, has announced all its moves to the world loud and clear. Even though scaling up from 20 per cent to 90 per cent (weapons-grade) is feasible for Iran given its technical capability, it is not the goal. If Iran wanted to build nuclear weapons at this stage, it would have also gone for the immediate revival of its Arak nuclear weapons site.

Second, by announcing to enrich to 20 per cent, Iran will have a bargaining chip when the Biden administration takes over and renegotiates the deal.

Third, the enrichment announcement is also aimed at satisfying the domestic constituency, which wanted a strong response to the killing of Fakhrizadeh.

Israel: End of Netanyahu era

Udbhav Krishna P, 6 June 2021

What happened?

On 31 May, far-right party leader Naftali Bennett threw support behind a 'unity government' in Israel to unseat Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

On 2 June, Israel's opposition cobbled together an eight-member coalition of right-wing, leftist, and centrist parties with a thin majority in a bid to end Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 12-year run.

On 3 June, after his rivals reached an agreement on forming a new government in Israel, Netanyahu signaled that he would not go down without a struggle. He called the proposed new diverse coalition that would oust him a "dangerous, left-wing government."

What is the background?

First, Israel's electoral system. The 120 members legislative assembly, the Knesset, has a nationwide proportional representation system. Rather than electing individual candidates, voters cast ballots for an entire party. Due to such a system, one single party gaining a majority is very unlikely. This system results in many parties coming together to form a coalition government. After the fourth election in two years, Netanyahu's Likud Party and coalition allied parties could not cross the 61-seat threshold. Thus, the opposition leader Yair Lapid was given 28 days to form a coalition government by the Israeli President on 5 May.

Second, Yair Lapid as an alternative to Netanyahu. Lapid's party finished second to Netanyahu's right-wing Likud, with 17 seats in an inconclusive 23 March national ballot. He was given a 2 June deadline from the Israeli President to announce a new government. Lapid's chances of success rested largely with Naftali Bennett, 49, a former defense chief and tech millionaire whose Yamina party's seven seats in the Parliament was enough to gain him the status of kingmaker. According to the BBC, under a rotation arrangement Naftali Bennett, would serve as a prime minister until 2023 before handing over to Lapid.

Third, the new coalition. It contains eight very different political parties - Yesh Atid (centrist) - led by Yair Lapid (17 seats), Kahol Lavan (Blue and White) (centrist) - led by Benny Gantz (eight), Yisrael Beiteinu (center-right to right-wing nationalist) - led by Avigdor Lieberman (seven), Labor (social-democratic) - led by Merav Michaeli (seven), Yamina (right-wing) - led by Naftali Bennett (seven), New Hope (center-right to right-wing)- led by Gideon Sa'ar (six), Meretz (left-wing, social-democratic) - led by Nitzan Horowitz (six), Raam (Arab Islamist) - led by Mansour Abbas (four) with affiliations from left to the far right are working together. United Arab List (Raam) party, whose leader Mansour Abbas won four seats in the Knesset, became the first Arab party to join a right-leaning coalition in Israeli history.

Fourth, a likely agenda for the new coalition. Members are diverse members and do not have anything in common other than removing PM Netanyahu from his 12 years' run as Prime Minister. The issues facing Israel are substantial: economic recovery from the pandemic, contentious issues like Palestinian statehood, religion and society.

What does it mean?

Will the coalition succeed? The coalition is diverse, and Netanyahu's likely response. While it is easier to build a coalition against a single person, it would be difficult to sustain. On the other hand, Netanyahu will try to break the fragile coalition government and remain in power because losing his constitutional position would be troublesome due to the corruption

charges against him. He would want his country to go for a fifth election to gain more right-wing votes after the recent Gaza conflict.

Israel: Fourth Election in two years, but the stalemate continue

Jeshil J Samuel, 28 March 2021

What happened?

On 23 March, Israel held its fourth parliamentary election in two years. The election was conducted after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government collapsed.

On the same day, Palestinian militants fired rockets at Beersheba moments after PM Netanyahu visited the city. The Israeli army responded with overnight aerial strikes targeting areas controlled by Gaza's Hamas Islamist rulers.

On 25 March, Israel's election commission announced the election results. The pro-Netanyahu bloc had won 52 seats, and the anti-Netanyahu bloc had won 57 seats out of 120 seats. The Likud party led with 30 seats, followed by the Yesh Atid party with 17 seats. Thus, the election has ended in a stalemate between both blocs since neither side has the required majority of 61 seats.

What is the background?

First, the continuing political stalemate. Since April 2019, Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud Party) and Benny Gantz (Blue and White Party) have failed to maintain a working coalition. Despite an agreement to switch powers after 18 months, PM Netanyahu denied Gantz, the leadership. Since its inception, the Knesset (Israel's legislature) has been mostly governed by coalition governments consisting of two or more parties. The problem within the coalition governments has been the primary issue for the stalemate.

Second, Netanyahu's survival strategy. Netanyahu has been the Prime Minister of Israel for the past 12 years, making him the longest-standing PM. Despite facing opposition

throughout his tenure, Netanyahu has always found a way to stay in power. He has used the legal system to validate his tenure. Even when faced with charges of corruption and bribery, Netanyahu was safeguarded by the legislature, which allowed him to remain in power. He had also pulled out support from coalition governments when his authority was challenged, knowing that re-election would end in a stalemate. This is one of the main reasons why Israelis have had to vote four times in the past two years.

Third, a divided opposition. Despite the opposing parties having won 57 seats in the recent elections and sharing the common goal of ending PM Netanyahu's tenure, they remain ineffective. Most of the opposition is highly diverse and comes from varying sides of the political spectrum. The chance for them to form a coalition is less than Netanyahu forming alliances with other rightist and orthodox parties to prove his majority.

What does this mean?

First, the ideological divide between the political parties has led to weak coalitions and has also impacted governance. If Israel is to recover from its economic slowdown due to the pandemic, then a stable government is essential.

Second, the uninterrupted reign of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Netanyahu and the Likud party seem to have made it clear that they intend to stay in power. He has used successive parliamentary elections as buffers to retain his political power. His support within the Israeli bureaucracy is still favourable and would continue to save him from allegations and criminal charges.

Third, the possibility of a fifth election. If neither of the blocs proves their majority, then Israeli citizens could be called to vote for the fifth time in two years.

Iraq: Pope Francis meets the Grand Ayatollah in Baghdad

Jeshil Samuel, 7 March 2021

What happened?

On 5 March, Pope Francis arrived in Baghdad, commencing his historic three-day visit to Iraq. This is the first-ever papal visit to the region, and also the Pope's first international visit since the pandemic began. During this visit, the Pope will meet prolific Islamic leaders and address the Christian community in the region.

On 6 March, the Pope visited the city of Nafaj, where he met the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Both the religious leaders spoke regarding the dwindling Christian community in Iraq and the threats against them. The Ayatollah affirmed that Christian citizens should be given a chance to live in peace and security just as any other Iraqi.

What is the background?

First, the Christian community in Iraq. Iraq has one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, dating back to 01 AD. The country's largest denominations include the Chaldean Catholics (67 per cent), who recognise the Pope's authority, and the members of the Assyrian Church of the East (20 per cent). The Christian population in Iraq was nearly 1.4 million before 2003, after which the number declined drastically.

Second, the rise in intolerance towards Christians and their persecution. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the public opinion towards the West and its culture turned hostile. The Christian population were regarded as defectors siding with the US. Since then, churches were attacked, Christians could not practice their religion freely, and Islamic fundamentalists fuelled hatred towards Christians. The 2010 terrorist attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad resulted in a massive exodus of the Christian population from the country. In 2014, when Islamic State militias overran northern Iraq, tens of thousands of Christians migrated to other countries fearing persecution.

Third, the decline of Christianity in Iraq. Once religious extremist groups like Al Qaeda started taking control over territory in Iraq, the country started exhibiting a zero-tolerance policy towards religious practices. Christians were either forced to convert to Islam or to leave the country. In other cases, they were not offered either of the solutions and were killed mercilessly.

What does this mean?

First, the Pope's visit could improve religious tolerance in Iraq and preserve the Christian community. At present, Iraq has 250,000-500,000 Christians. The Pope's call for an end to the violence and strife ensuing in the region could also push the Iraqi government to keep a leash on terrorism and religious extremism. Second, this visit could also cement a better relationship between Iraq and Europe.

Saudi Arabia: The criminal case against Mohammed bin Salman

Sourina Bej, 7 March 2021

What happened?

On 2 March, the Reporters without Borders (RSF) filed a criminal complaint in Germany, charging Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and four other high-ranking officials with crimes against humanity, including the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The lawsuit has been submitted in front of Germany's Public Prosecutor.

The lawsuit comes less than a week after the CIA released an intelligence report that concluded the Crown Prince had "approved an operation to capture or kill Khashoggi."

What is the background?

First, Saudi Arabia's notorious records in stifling press freedoms. RSF has ranked Saudi Arabia 170th out of 180 countries on its World Press Freedom Index. Their complaint takes into account the situation of 34 journalists arbitrarily imprisoned in the country. It includes writer Raif Badawi, who was sentenced to 10 years

imprisonment in 2014 and 1,000 lashes for a blog he founded. The complaint comes after a detailed record of willful killing, torture, sexual violence, and enforced disappearances of journalists. Amongst it, the killing of Washington Post columnist Khashoggi has been one of the triggers for the RSF. After two years, the response to the killing has been only sanctions and visa bans by the US for 76 Saudi officials. The Biden administration has stopped short of pursuing a tough stance against Mohammed bin Salman.

Second, the spurt in crackdowns of dissidents by Mohammed bin Salman. Apart from imprisoning journalists, dissenting voices of several activists and royal members have been equally repressed by the crown prince. In February 2021, the mysterious disappearance of a Saudi dissident, Ahmed Abdullah al-Harbi, living in Montreal adds to the new fear among the Saudi exiles of abduction and deaths. Similar has been the fear allayed by Prince Khaled bin Farhan al-Saud, who now lives in Düsseldorf in Germany after leaving the Kingdom where he had incensed MBS with his calls for human rights reforms. In recent years, several reports have surfaced of Saudi authorities under the Prince, repeatedly intimidating critics living abroad and in some instances abduct or repatriate them to Saudi Arabia. Domestically, Prince Mohammed has been tightening his grip on power since he was appointed as crown prince in 2017. With King Salman's old age and possible ill-health as a trigger, he has detained senior royals in 2020 including two members, Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz and Mohammed bin Nayef who were immediate contenders to the royalty.

Third, the role of Germany's judiciary in safeguarding freedoms under international law. Germany has been selected to file the complaint due to its legal system that gives the court jurisdiction over international crimes committed abroad. Germany's Code of Crimes Against International Law includes the right to prosecute crimes against humanity committed "as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilians." The principle of universal jurisdiction is enshrined in Article 1, allowing

German prosecutors and courts to prosecute crimes that were not committed in Germany or against German citizens. The most recent example has been on 24 February when under this law, a former member of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's security services was sentenced to four and a half years in prison for abetting the torture of civilians in the Syrian civil war. Commonly, the ICC hears the cases charged with crimes against humanity but Saudi Arabia has neither signed nor ratified the international agreement. Thus, making it important for RSF to choose Germany.

What does it mean?

Two questions: Will Germany prosecute? Even if it does, will it have any impact on MBS?

Until now Germany has led cases pertaining to the ones filed against the Islamic State and officials involved in the Syrian civil war. But in indicting the crown prince, if the German court decides to hear the case it will send a strong signal from Europe to the country, which until now has been lacking since the killing of Khashoggi. The diplomatic relation is bound to play a role in determining how the verdict will be delivered. But more importantly with an ambition to power, it remains to be seen what MBS would do next. Until now the international pressure against the crown prince has done minimal to upset the domestic clampdowns and a possible hearing could do the same.

The GCC Summit and the thaw in Qatar-Saudi Arabia relations

By Lakshmi V Menon, 9 January 2021

What happened?

On 4 January, the Abu Samra border between Saudi Arabia and Qatar was opened. Subsequently, on 5 January, the Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani headed to Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia to attend the 41st Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, during which, the Al-Ula declaration or the 'solidarity and stability' deal was concluded. The deal formally ended the Qatar blockade. The Summit outcome, titled "Summit of Sultan Qaboos and Sheikh Sabah",

aimed to "reinforce the Council's strengths, realize the aspirations of the citizens of the Gulf, and overcome all obstacles that hinder collaboration among Member States."

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman expressed hope to witness a unified effort to confront regional challenges, particularly Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programme. Meanwhile, Egypt signed a reconciliation agreement with Qatar at the summit.

Various states of the Arab world, including Iran, welcomed the deal. Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif congratulated Qatar for its "brave resistance to pressure & extortion". "To our other Arab neighbors: Iran is neither an enemy nor threat. Enough scapegoating – especially with your reckless patron on his way out. Time to take our offer for a strong region," he tweeted.

What is the background?

First, the blockade. On 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain imposed a historic land, air and maritime blockade on Qatar. The corner-stone of allegations was Doha's alleged support for Islamic extremism in the Middle East. The coalition, or the anti-Qatar quartet, desired to strong-arm Doha into complying with their thirteen demands.

Second, Qatar's accusations. The Althanis further agitated the Saudis and Emiratis with criticism. In December 2018, Qatari Foreign Minister accused Saudi of destabilizing the region through the Yemeni war, blockading of Qatar and kidnapping of the Lebanese Prime Minister. He condemned the UAE for destabilizing Somalia by supporting Somaliland, paying Al-Qaeda fighters in Yemen and disrupting Libya.

Third, the US role. The declaration comes ahead of Joe Biden taking over presidency from Donald Trump on 20 January. The Trump administration had been pushing for the resolution of the blockade to complement the Trump-Jared "deal of the century" which aims to contain and counter Iran. It is a noteworthy

achievement for the Trump administration as the US pressure has made conflicting Middle Eastern powerhouses such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel concordant.

What does it mean?

First, the failure of the blockade. The quartet's demands included shutting down media outlets allegedly funded by Qatar, including Al Jazeera, expelling Iranian military representatives from Qatar, shutting down the upcoming Turkish military base and ceasing support to regional Islamist groups. Qatar rejected all accusations as baseless and expressed readiness for dialogue throughout the blockade. Today, Doha-Tehran working relationship has bolstered, and none of the objectives against Qatar has been achieved.

Second, Qatar has emerged stronger. Saudi Arabia's game plan was to convert Qatar into a vassal state and handicap her independent foreign policy. Riyadh carried out a massive public relations effort for escalating diplomatic pressure on Doha. However, Qatar emerged more self-reliant with flourishing multi-sectoral businesses and global trade.

Third, under the late Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait had hosted numerous events for the resolution of the crisis, the deepest rift in the GCC in the last four decades. The Al-Ula declaration is a momentous step towards the conflict's resolution.

UAE: The Hope mission enters the Mars Orbit

Harini Madhusudan, 14 February 2021

What happened?

On 9 February 2021, the United Arab Emirates' first interplanetary mission to Mars, called Hope, was placed into orbit around the planet. The UAE becomes the fifth spacefaring country after the US, the Soviet Union, Europe, and India. Mohammad Al Gergawi, Minister of Cabinet Affairs, called the success a national achievement that brings pride to every Emirati and Arab, and stated, "The journey of the Hope Probe reflects the broader journey of the UAE."

The challenges that faced the mission team in turning the probe from a dream to reality in six years mirrors the challenges the UAE has faced in its journey as a nation who made the impossible possible.”

What is the background?

First, Mars Missions over the decades. 49 missions have been made to Mars, since the first successful flyby in 1965. The mission types include flyby, orbiters, or rovers. Four space agencies have successfully made it to Mars: NASA, the former Soviet Union space program, the ESA and ISRO. Space programs of Japan and China, have attempted Mars or Martian moon missions without success. The successful missions of UAE and China would add to the total successful agencies to six. Currently, China’s Tianwen-1 and the US’ Perseverance Rover, are expected to reach the red planet with a 10-day gap.

Second, the UAE’s Hope Mission. Hope is UAE’s fourth space mission and first interplanetary mission. The Hope probe was launched on 19 July 2020, onboard Japan’s H-2A rocket from the Japanese space centre and has travelled for seven months and at a speed of 120,000km/h. This week, it executed a 27-minute precise burn to manoeuvre and be captured by the Martian gravity. Hope probe has an overall mission life of one Martian year, about 687 earth days. The mission was announced in 2014 with a cost of approximately USD 200m, marking the Arab world’s first interplanetary mission. The satellite carries three instruments that will study the seasonal and daily changes in the Martian atmosphere. Hope is expected to collect more than one terabyte (1,000 GB) of new data, which will be shared with over 200 academic and scientific institutions worldwide for free. The mission has been developed and managed by seven engineers who are all said to be below the age of 35.

Third, the rise of the middle powers in Outer Space. The 2020s would see the domain grow both laterally and horizontally. A high number of space agencies have planned for ambitious missions in Outer space. In 2022, Russia and the

ESA have their Mars missions planned. The Hope mission’s success can be seen as a display of multi-institutional collaboration between the US, Japan and UAE. These collaborations could act as the driving force behind a significant increase in the number of nations that are developing their space programs for bigger missions but at affordable expenses.

What does it mean?

The missions to Mars in the 1960s and the 1980s were driven by the need to explore the planet. Since the confirmation of the presence of ancient water on the Martian soil in 2000, there has been a renewed interest to explore the planet. By the 1990s, the costs of outer space missions reduced, encouraging more projects to reach the red planet. The following decade is expected to see many such attempts at deep space explorations with long-term goals with crucial security implications. Having successful missions is a sign of national prestige, however, they carry the underlying political-economic interests of the nations investing in them. For example, the end goal of UAE’s mission is to establish a human colony on Mars by 2117.

The Middle East: Trump's latest move to designate the Houthis as 'Foreign Terrorists'

By Rashmi Ramesh, 16 January 2021

What happened?

On 10 January 2021, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared the Houthis a "foreign terrorist organization". The designation will come into effect from 19 January, a day before Joe Biden takes charge as the US president. He stated that the "designation is an attempt to achieve a peaceful, sovereign and united Yemen that is free from the Iranian interference and at peace with its neighbours."

On 14 January, the United Nations and other aid organizations that work in Yemen called the decision as a step backwards in a country that is torn by six years of war and poverty.

On 11 January, Iran’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson denounced the designation and

termed it as a move that would end as a failed decision. Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif condemned the decision for reflecting "utter contempt for peace", and said it will worsen the situation in Yemen.

What is the background?

First, the ongoing war. Yemen, the most impoverished Arab country, is in the midst of a civil war between the government and the Houthi rebels since 2014. While the government is supported by the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and UAE, the rebels are backed by Iran and its militias.

Second, the US role in the Yemen war. The US has been involved in Yemen since the Obama presidency. The US military was directly involved in the airstrikes targeting certain suspected Al-Qaeda terrorists and their camps. According to Airwars, an independent monitoring group, between 2017 and 2018, the airstrikes peaked, which claimed the lives of at least 86 civilians. The Trump administration has mostly depended on and supported the Arab coalition, particularly Saudi Arabia, for achieving its objectives in Yemen.

Third, the US's internal divide between the White House and Congress over the war in Yemen and the US's role. Trump has substantially increased the sale of arms to the Arab coalition countries, despite strong demand from the Congress to cut ties with Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, in 2019, the Trump administration managed to circumvent the Congressional review regarding major weapons sales worth USD eight billion, by declaring an emergency over Iran.

Fourth, the Trump administration's policy against Iran. The decision to designate Houthi militia as a terrorist organization is a part of Trump's 'maximum pressure' policy.

Fifth, the Houthis's resilience in the civil war began six years ago; they have gained support from Iranian militias, and are no closer to being defeated.

What does it mean?

First, the cascading ill effects. The UN Humanitarian Chief Mark Lowcock addressed the UNSC on 14 January and warned that the designation is "likely to lead to large-scale famine on a scale that the world has not seen for nearly 40 years." The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also expressed concerns about the humanitarian crisis that would unfurl due to the US's move. The Houthis control approximately 70 per cent of Yemen and are a de-facto authority. Several NGOs and aid organizations serving in the country coordinate with the rebels to supply food and basic needs.

Second, the move plays into the expectations of the Arab coalition. The Arab coalition supports the internationally recognized Yemen government against the Houthis and its ally Iran. The GCC welcomed the US move to designate the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization.

Third, the pressure on the Biden administration. Many US lawmakers have called upon Biden to reverse the designation order, citing humanitarian crisis and famine. However, it would not be easy for the Biden administration to reverse it.

Libya: Ten years after Gaddafi, the Libyans look forward with a new hope

Apoorva Sudhakar, 21 February 2021

What happened?

On 17 February, thousands of Libyans gathered in the capital city of Tripoli to mark the 10th anniversary of the uprising that led to the end of four decades of Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi's dictatorship. Arab News quoted several of those gathered for the celebrations. One civilian, who took part in the 2011 uprising, acknowledged the conflict that followed. According to him, "It doesn't mean you have to choose between Qaddafi and chaos. Revolution is a process. We must build a new Libya that we deserve." Others blame the post-2011 leaders for the current state of affairs in Libya.

On 17 February, Amnesty International said, "A decade after the overthrow of Muammar al-

Gaddafi, justice has yet to be delivered to victims of war crimes and serious human rights violations including unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, torture, forced displacement and abductions committed by militias and armed groups.”

What is the background?

First, a brief recap of the revolution against Gaddafi. On 17 February 2011, protests erupted against Gaddafi. The protests escalated and threatened the interests of external powers in the oil-rich country. Subsequently, Gaddafi was killed in NATO-led intervention in October 2011. Libya descended into chaos resulting from the sudden power vacuum. An election dispute in 2014 led to the formation of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), and a parallel rebel authority, the Libyan National Army (LNA). The GNA was centred in western Libya while LNA controlled the East.

Second, external interventions. After the formation of the two parallel authorities, external powers like Russia, Turkey, France got involved in the conflict, to safeguard their priorities regarding Libya’s oil and gas reserves. The GNA was supported by Turkey, Qatar and Italy. On the other hand, the LNA, led by a former general and aide to Gaddafi, was supported by Egypt, France, Russia and the UAE. The power struggle between the above countries fueled the conflict in Libya.

Third, the newly formed interim government. On 5 February 2021, 75 delegates from Libya agreed on a new united interim government during UN-brokered peace talks; the interim government will ensure parliamentary elections in December 2021. The new president has been chosen from eastern Libya and the prime minister from the west. This was the result of a ceasefire signed in October 2020 and also one of the first positive developments in the country since 2014.

Fourth, the Arab Spring of 2011. The overthrow of Ben Ali’s dictatorial regime in Tunisia inspired the revolution in Libya. Other countries like Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Sudan followed

suit with a common demand to overhaul the authoritarian systems.

What does it mean?

First, external interventions without an exit strategy or a plan ahead for the country lead to increased instability. This is evident not just in Libya, but in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other countries as well. More often than not, external powers let the conflicts continue to serve their self-interests and increase their leverage in big power politics.

Second, though the 2011 revolution did not produce an immediate victory for the protesters, they have now pinned their hopes on the newly formed unity government. How the government charts out its course over the months leading to the December elections will decide the future of Libya.

Tunisia: President announces rule by decree

Mohamad Aseel, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 22 September, Tunisian President Kais Saied declared that he will 'rule by decree' and defy the constitution's parts that challenge his executive and legislative authorities. According to the new rules that have been published in the official Gazette allows him to release 'Legislative text' upon his decree, he is also entitled to appoint a cabinet and determine its policies and direction of implementation without any interferences. The announcements raised immediate concerns among the Opposition; a senior leader of the Heart of Tunisia party rejected the presidential decisions calling it a "premeditated coup". The leaders of the Ennahda, the largest opposition party condemned it, as the declaration meant "cancelling the constitution".

On 23 September, Attayar, Al Joumhour, Akef and Ettakatol parties released a joint statement calling for an end to Saied's intervention. These minor parties have significant influence among the non-elite sections of the country. The statement questions the President's authority and rejects his legitimacy, "He will be held

responsible for all the possible repercussions of this dangerous step". A senior official of the UGTT union said, "Tunisia is heading towards absolute, individual rule."

On 24 September, the UGTT labor Union, a powerful political entity in the country said in a statement the recent developments can be a "danger to Democracy". The union had earlier welcomed Saied's decision to dissolve the Parliament but had called for an immediate return political stability and to operate within the bounds of the constitution. The head of Amnesty International commented that the development is worrying and cautioned, "the warning signs are blinking red".

What is the background?

First, the suspension of the Parliament. Kais Saied suspended the Parliament and dismissed Rached Mechichi as the Prime Minister on 25 July; he took over the legislative and executive powers. The decision came after series of nationwide protests against the misgovernance of the moderate-Islamic Ennahda party resulting in a plummeting economy. The party was accused of being instrumental in establishing a highly a corrupted administration that failed to handle the covid pandemic effectively. The legal immunity enjoyed by all Parliamentarians were withdrawn, and travel bans imposed. The Opposition condemned the suspension to be a constitutional coup.

Second, the delayed decisions. The suspension was declared to be for 30 days, followed by the naming of a new Prime minister along with the cabinet. By 25 August, the interim administration was brought under both growing international and domestic pressure to name a new Prime minister.

The Opposition headed by Ennahda and other minor parties called nationwide mobilization against Saied's administration and called for a swift return to the former status quo. Meanwhile, many supporters of the recent interventions have openly expressed concerns regarding the absence of clarity of Saied's roadmap to a new government.

What does it mean?

First, Kais Saeid, despite denying any aspiration to rule, can become an authoritarian ruler in the future. The new administration lacks support from the existing political parties and bureaucracy. He is criticized for lacking any prior experiences in governance; critics warn of the formation of a highly authoritarian regime that is incapable of delivering efficient governance. The security forces have remained uninvolved after the suspension, but in the light of the recent reforms, Tunisia's military and intelligence can be a critical factor in the new administration.

Second, the fragmented and divided Opposition that had created disunity and lack of collective consensus is being brought under a single banner to resist Saied's administrative reforms collectively. A strong and combined opposition that resist the new governance can possibly recreate the bloody images of the 2011 Arab Spring that swept across various countries in the region.

Third, Tunisia was often seen as the beacon of democracy among the nations that was part of the Arab Spring. The new governmental policies can undermine the ideals and achievements of the revolution. A political tussle in Tunisia in the future can also cause regional instability in the North African Belt.

Sahel: End of France's military operation

By Anu Maria Joseph, 13 June 2021

What happened?

On 10 June, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "The time has come; the continuation of our commitment in the Sahel will not be in the same way. Following consultations with our partners, we will initiate a profound transformation of our military presence in the Sahel. We will keep a counter-terrorism pillar with Special Forces with several hundred forces. And there will be a second pillar that will be cooperation, and which we will reinforce."

He also said that those left with the French military would join with other European nations as a part of the Takuba Task Force fighting against the militants in the Sahel and the regional forces of Mali and Nigeria. The scaling down of troops would occur in an "organized way", and the details will be finalized by the end of June. Analyst Abudu Bulama Bukarti from Tony Blair Institute for Global Change said: "if France draws down its troops, it is going to create a security vacuum, because clearly the domestic troops and the UN peacekeeping missions don't have the required capacity to do the fight by themselves".

What is the background?

First, the political instability in northern Africa. On 3 June, France suspended its military support in Mali following the second military coup within nine months. President Macron said: "the long-term presence of France in external operations cannot be a substitute to the return of the state and services of the state to the political stability and choice of sovereign states". Fragile political regimes and local militaries are bogging down anti-terrorist operations. In the background, authorities in Mali and Burkina Faso are trying to negotiate with extremist groups.

Second, France's role so far, and a new approach. France has been actively leading counter-insurgency military operations in the Sahel region since 2013. Currently, it has deployed 5,100 troops in the region as a part of Operation Barkhane. Now, France is attempting to increase the local capacity. On 10 June, the International Counter-Terrorist Academy backed by France was inaugurated in Ivory Coast. The academy expects to train security forces, including national counter-terrorism officials, troops, and magistrates, to bring a regional competition in the fight against terrorism. The academy would be the beginning of the transformation of France's counter-terrorism efforts where it urges for coherent regional cooperation.

The change is also due to anti-French protests. Demonstrations against the French military presence in the region have been taking place on

a regular basis. Also the strains within France. France has lost 55 soldiers since 2013. Operation Barkhane costs more than USD 900 million per year alone for France. The deaths of soldiers and the high cost of operation made the mission unpopular in Paris.

Third, increasing anti-France sentiments and reasons behind it. There is growing suspicion of France's intentions as it maintains its strong cultural, economic, political and diplomatic influences, which adds hostility towards the French military presence in Sahel. During the NATO summit in London on 4 December 2020, Macron said: "I don't want to have troops on the ground in the Sahel where there is ambiguity towards anti-French movements."

What does it mean?

First, Africa has to take more responsibility - both at individual and regional levels. Second, the rest of the world has to build capacity in Africa towards the above. Third, the long road ahead in fighting extremism and militancy in Africa.

Mali: The "coup within a coup"

Apoorva Sudhakar, 30 May 2021

What happened?

On 28 May, Mali's constitutional court appointed Colonel Assimi Goita as the transitional President. It ruled that he would "lead the transition process to its conclusion" due to the "vacancy in the presidency."

On 27 May, Colonel Assimi Goita declared himself the transitional President; he led the military coup in August 2020. According to the BBC, Col Goita said: "President Bah Ndaw and PM Moctar Ouane had failed in their duties and were seeking to sabotage the country's transition." On the same day, soldiers released Ndaw and Ouane from detention.

On 26 May, Goita's aide announced that Ndaw and Ouane had resigned and added that "negotiations are ongoing for their liberation and the formation of a new government." On the same day, the UNSC called on the security

forces for a "safe, immediate and unconditional release" of all detained officials.

On 24 May, the military detained Ndaw and Ouane following a cabinet reshuffle wherein two military leaders who led the August coup, including Goita, were left out. Aljazeera reported that the UN and African Union released a joint statement signed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), US, UK, France, and Germany, calling for the civilian leaders' "immediate and unconditional release." The statement said: "We emphasize that the ill-considered action taken today carries the risk of weakening the mobilization of the international community in support of Mali." BBC quoted the French President terming the development "a coup within a coup."

What is the background?

First, the two coups within a year. In early 2020, anti-government protests on the grounds of corruption, crippling economy, pandemic mismanagement, and a deteriorating security situation gathered momentum. The protests were consolidated and led by the 5 June Movement, also known as the M5-RFP. On 19 August 2020, the then President was overthrown by the military. Since September 2020, Mali has been under a transitional government; it is expected to last until the proposed elections in February 2022. However, the coup garnered criticism from several quarters. The military mitigated the threat of sanctions by appointing a civilian leadership with Ndaw and Ouane as the interim President and Prime Minister in September; they were former Defence and Foreign Minister, respectively. Meanwhile, Goita was appointed as Vice President. Over the months, the M5-RFP expressed its contentions with the military, claiming that it was excluded from talks and called for a cabinet reshuffle and a subsequent "broad-based" cabinet. This led to the latest cabinet reshuffle that triggered the second coup in May 2021.

Second, the political complexities in Mali. There is growing resentment within Malians regarding the security situation of the country. The August coup was celebrated with hope for improved security conditions, given that there is a growing

Islamist militancy in the country and in the neighbouring countries. Over the past few months, militants have targeted several military bases. Though France launched a military intervention in 2013, civilians perceive it to be ineffective, and there is growing anger within the civilians against the French military.

Third, regional and external reactions. The two coups have resulted in criticism against Mali. Following the August coup, ECOWAS had suspended financial assistance to Mali; the sanctions were lifted only after the transitional leadership was handed over to Ndaw and Ouane. Similarly, following the latest coup, France has threatened Mali with EU sanctions.

What does it mean?

First, the latest coup demonstrates the fragile leadership within Mali and the lack of political strength among the civilian leadership. It proves that the M5-RFP's criticism regarding the involvement of the military in the civilian-led transition was indeed correct. Further, the constitutional court falling in line with the military also highlights the weakness of democratic institutions.

Second, no amount of external pressure or troop deployment will solve the political complexities in Mali. Goita taking overpower has led to a renewal of the threat of sanctions, but it is unlikely that the military will yield to pressure this time.

Uganda: Museveni wins a sixth term amid politically charged elections

By Apoorva Sudhakar, 16 January 2021

What happened?

On 16 January, the incumbent president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, won a sixth term with 58.64 per cent of the votes. However, the main opposition candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, alleged that the elections were rigged. On the same day, security forces had surrounded Wine's house.

On 14 January, Uganda held its elections under heavy security presence as political tensions

soared high between Museveni and Wine. Apart from complaints of technical issues and delay in the polling process, the election day remained largely peaceful.

On 12 January, Museveni announced a ban on social media. His announcement was in retaliation to Facebook's decision to suspend several official accounts the previous day. However, the ban on social media extended to an internet blackout subsequently.

On 11 January, Facebook suspended several accounts of government officials and members of the ruling party, alleging that the accounts engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" and "manipulating the public debate." In response, Museveni's senior press secretary accused Facebook of attempting to influence the elections.

What is the background?

First, the refusal by authoritarian leaders to step down. Museveni has been in power for 34 years; in 2021, he claimed that his governance expertise would make him the ideal candidate. Till date, Africa has witnessed several authoritarian regimes lasting for decades. For example, in 2020, Alassane Ouattara and Alpha Condé of Ivory Coast and Guinea respectively won their third terms by introducing constitutional amendments favouring them.

Second, Wine's popularity and volatile election campaigns. His campaign represented the ethnically and economically marginalized communities which made him a popular choice among the youth (under 30) which constitutes around 75 per cent of the population.

Third, stifling traditional and social media. During the election campaigns, journalists covering the Wine campaign were targeted by security forces. In December 2020, the government ordered all journalists to register with the Uganda Media Council; without accreditation from the Council, journalists were not allowed to cover political news. It also requested Google to take down 14 YouTube channels alleging that they fuelled the November violence. Authoritarian regimes in

Africa feel threatened by mobilization of masses through social media.

Fourth, targeting the opposition. Since the campaigns kicked off in Uganda, hundreds of Wine supporters and his campaign officials were detained on several occasions. Similarly, other opposition candidates were also arrested. In the pretext of COVID-19, the government called for online campaigns, thereby putting those with lower funds at a disadvantage.

What does it mean?

First, Museveni's win places him along with the long-term rulers in the rest of Africa who came to power as reformists but retained presidency through various means, legal or illegal. However, the victory was not easy; Museveni's relentless crackdown on Wine's campaign was an indicator that he underestimated Wine's popularity, which stems from Uganda's changing demographics.

Second, Wine previously urged his supporters to reject the early results, which showed a clear lead for Museveni. How the opposition leaders decide to address this dispute — whether they will boycott the results or approach the court — will decide their political standing. In various instances, boycotting the results has only led to the winners staying in power. However, Wine is likely to remain a popular figure in Ugandan politics for the coming year