

Arab Spring turns chilly for some

Joseph Wakim

US President Barak Obama's championing of "universal rights" in his recent speech to the UN General Assembly apparently exempts Palestinians, while his sanctions of "those who trample on human rights" exempts American allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

These double standards are most evident when Obama contrasts Syria with Bahrain. Both have used mass violence to control their respective uprisings, yet he has called on the UN's Security Council to "sanction the Syrian regime", while asking Bahrain to "pursue meaningful dialogue" with the main opposition bloc - the Wifaq.

The sultanist kingdom of Bahrain held its elections last weekend, amid more violence and boycotts, and Syria will hold its first multi-party elections next February, after fulfilling its promised constitutional reforms.

While Obama pledges to "serve as a voice for those who have been silenced", this apparently exempts the mostly Shi'ite population who are oppressed by King Khalifa in Bahrain.

Obama propagates the narrative all the anti-government protesters in Syria are "protesting peacefully, standing silently in the streets". Yet he knows many of them are externally sponsored militia and mercenaries who are armed, trained, funded and imported.

A recently released WikiLeaks cable confirmed the US State Department has funnelled \$6 million to finance anti-government parties and exiles, as well as an anti-government television channel, Barada TV.

In the absence of professional media in Syria, the anonymous voices of these exiles and amateur images from mobile phones have had a field day, with their "feeds" too often broadcast without checks, translations and context.

We are shown crowds chanting pro-government slogans and carrying pro-government banners (in Arabic) but the voiceover (in English) tells us they are anti-government protests, which is inexcusable propaganda.

Even Al Jazeera TV, operating from Bahrain's neighbour Qatar, is notorious for its pro-Sunni bias.

On May 16, the ABC's *Media Watch* exposed a completely falsified report of "Syrian troops beating detained protesters". The footage was later proven to have been shot in Lebanon three years ago. There have been CNN reports about 40 babies dying due to power cuts in Hama, which was later proven to have happened in Egypt.

While last month's UNSC resolution condemning Syria's "widespread violations of human rights" was amplified in Western media, the clause urging "all sides to act with utmost restraint, and to refrain from reprisals, including attacks against state institutions" was muted. Was this because it begs inconvenient questions such as who are "all sides"? What "attacks against state institutions"?

We do not hear about the mutilation of Syrian soldiers or police, because it raises questions about those "protesting peacefully". We do not hear about Saudi-sponsored Salafists who are promoting a theocracy not a democracy because it raises questions about another "friend" in the Sunni Gulf region.

The Arab Spring gave rise to jasmynes, but also to parasitic weeds and seeds falling from foreign gardens and taking root. The first casualty of war may be the truth, but this is not a war and we have a right to know the truth.

Joseph Wakim is a founder of the Australian Arabic Council