

## **Political reforms in the GCC states: Challenges for the future**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Arab Spring has been one of the most valiant movements to sweep the Arab world for the past few decades, demonstrating the people's capacity to voice their discontent with authoritarian rule and governments that had largely remained impervious to representative governance, transparency, and accountability for their citizens. Democracy has expanded significantly in every other major region of the world except oil monarchies of the Gulf well known as GCC Countries. While ethno-religious divisions and their manipulation have hindered democratization, they have not excluded political reform. Why are the oil monarchies of the only region of the world to have been largely untouched by the third wave of global democratization? This article implicitly or explicitly tackles these important questions by analyzing the roots, nature, and most of all the consequences of "liberalized autocracy" in the GCC Countries.

**Key Words :** Political liberalization, Liberalised autocracy, Rentier state, Demonstration effect, Oil monarchies of the Gulf, Majlis al-Shura, Mukhabarat state

Arab Spring have led to a fundamental realignment of the relationship between the citizen and the state in the GCC Countries (Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman), holding once politically immune leaders responsible for citizens' needs. For Arabs, theirs is a struggle for social justice and personal freedoms. Though many of these protests have been borne out of economic grievances, calls on the street have persistently demanded political reform, particularly more representative systems of government. Meanwhile, in the Gulf States, pressure is also mounting to redefine the social contract between rulers and ruled. These nations have long been impervious to popular demands, as they have managed to quell unrest by distributing their massive oil wealth to their citizenry. Though some Gulf States have embarked on political reform, the overall response to the Arab Awakenings has been economic, with rulers attempting to expand the rentier system by granting additional financial benefits to citizens. Yet calls for political reform persist<sup>1</sup>.

Established on 25 May 1981 in Riyadh, the Gulf Cooperation Council popularly known as the GCC States is a political and economic union. Apart from geographic proximity, shared language, and culture, similar political system based on Islamic beliefs encouraged these countries to establish a regional multi-lateral forum with a twin objectives of maintaining peace and stability in the area. But these countries were not economically equal. In comparison with the wider West Asia, the oil monarchies of the Gulf constitute a distinct subgroup<sup>2</sup>. The countries of the GCC, with the exception of Bahrain, all enjoy a disproportionately high level of public and private sector wealth from their oil and, increasingly, gas revenues. Within these unusual political economies, political activism is more subdued than in their regional neighbours, as high levels of wealth and standards of living have historically

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served to stifle widespread demands for change<sup>3</sup>. Qatar is a prime example, with a negligible appetite for political change among the small population.

There are number of issues which have the potential to motivate the political liberalization in the GCC States. They can be broadly divided into two categories- internal and external. At present demographic explosion, increasing unemployment, role of civil society, nature of rentier state, increasing participation of women's are major internal factors. One of the more complex contextual factors concerns the indirect geopolitical effects of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. The resulting highly charged political climate is fostering political activism and awareness among both pro- reformers and traditionalist. The pressures of globalisation have also an impact on the domestic environment of GCC countries and the opinions held by their populations. Moreover, globalization, and particularly economic globalization, intensifies pressures on rulers to be more transparent and accountable in the administration of state resources. Since the beginning of state formation in the Arab Gulf region, national and social organization appeared in Bahrain and Kuwait at the start of the last century. These were effective institutions that registered achievements in the fields of education, literary development, and public culture. However, after the discovery of oil, these institutions became subject to state control and became tools of political authority. Over the last three decades, the number of these organisations has increased in most Gulf States. However, their role has diminished and their efficiency has declined. More space has been made in the Gulf for political activity, beginning in the period following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. That war was a catalyst for liberalization most notably in Kuwait, but also throughout the Gulf. While these countries are usually perceived as more "traditional" despite the region's long history of monarchy and other forms of autocracy, Kuwait and Bahrain have received the designation "partly free"<sup>4</sup>. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 created "new realities" such as demand for change and the huge expenses of the war<sup>5</sup>. Gulf populations began openly to question both the large regional footprint of the United States and the inability of the leaders to protect them from invaders, both Western and Iraqi. The "demonstration effect"<sup>6</sup> of the fall of the Soviet Union added its influence as well, adding to a series of liberalization measures that were defensive in nature, ways for the regimes to cope with some popular demands and to the West<sup>7</sup>. Leaders of Gulf States became aware of the necessity to adapt the political institutions to the evolving economic and social dynamics. This growing awareness among Gulf states leaders has found its more caricatural expression when Muhammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai and vice-president of the UAE, told the Arab Strategy Forum in Dubai in December 2004: "I tell you my fellow Arab leaders: if you don't change you will be changed". One way to achieve this was through the process of institutional openings.

Tribal and clan leaders naturally favored a system that kept their social framework intact. As Al-Azmeh has put it with respect to Saudi Arabia, "The absolute monopoly of power by one particular clan required the maintenance of tribal particularism and of the social system of stratification prevalent in the desert." This system gave relative protection to Gulf societies from the potential unlimited autocracy of their leaders. An individual benefited from his clan's or tribe's physical defence, social services and economic cooperation as well as the legitimacy and reputation of his kin-group. In societies that did not tolerate (and made illegal) the formation of political parties and interest groups, the kin-based structures were the only time-honored and legitimate social framework. Another political practice pertaining to this system was the use of the *majlis*, an open meeting held periodically by a member of the royal family (sometimes holding a position in the government, or acting as regional governor) hosting lower ranking members of his community, or of lower-ranking families and tribal groups acquainted with him. Members of such groups usually came to ask for assistance to fend off demands of the state bureaucracy, to complain about the government's conduct or other matter relevant to citizens, or to ask for personal financial assistance. The *majlis* allows access to supreme leaders and makes it possible for them to extend their intervention (*wasta*) so as to ease a simple

citizen's way in facing the government. Thus, the institution of the *majlis* combined with other advantages of the kin-based divisions in society to grant the citizens more protection, fulfillment of basic needs, identity, and representation vis-à-vis their governments.

In the 1990, notably as a result of the Kuwait-Iraq war of 1990-91, some of the fabric of Gulf regimes and societies changed. The dependence on Western forces to defend the Gulf States against Iraq tarnished the image of Gulf leaders as invincible, and made them appear hesitant and weak in the eyes of their societies. The old age and health difficulties of several Gulf leaders (in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain for example) contributed to their declining aura. The demographic growth of local populations, notably in Saudi Arabia, whose population grew from about 8 million in the 1970s to around 23 million in the 1990s, made it difficult to retain the kinship-based political ties and the governments' preferences for certain families. Too many clan members who were not allied to government networks graduated from the developing educational system in the Gulf or Western universities, and competed for jobs or to join business. They were more ready than their predecessors to both criticize and defy government policies.

With the end of Cold War, a wave of political reforms swept over much of the Arab world, including the member countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). While some of these reforms were cosmetic and intended to cover up regime failure to perform the distributive functions, they opened up the outlets for free expression of opinion and democratic representation. Several public attempts have been made in the Gulf to effect political participation. These attempts differ in terms of magnitude and quality from one state to the other. For instance, Bahrain witnessed demonstrations and calls for a return to democracy and the constitution of 1973 and this set in motion a process of political reform. Thus the National Action Charter was approved in a public referendum in February 2001, followed by approval of the amended constitution in February 2002<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, municipal council elections (cancelled since 1956) were held with the participation of all political forces including women, who were given the right to vote and to be elected, in May 2002. Finally, general parliamentary elections were held in October 2002<sup>9</sup>. As for Qatar, its political leadership has decided to speed up political participation. The passing of a permanent constitution and approving it by a public referendum in April 2003, in preparation for free elections to the Consultative Assembly, evidence this<sup>10</sup>. Even Saudi Arabia, the country often seen as the most conservative of the GCC states did not escape the winds of change in the 1990s<sup>11</sup>. While Saudi Arabia has undergone massive social change since the mid-1960s, the most dramatic political developments since the 1960 political challenge of the 'Liberal Princes' occurred only after the outbreak of the Kuwait crisis in 1990<sup>12</sup>. Under pressure from both liberals and Islamist opposition in the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Saudi King announced a number of reforms, notably the foundation of Basic System of Government and the creation of the Kingdom's first national consultative council, the *Majlis al-Shura*, which was inaugurated in August 1993<sup>13</sup>. Together with the evolution of the Shura as an inclusive and complex body, the introduction of a new press and publication law in 2001 underlines the Saudi experience in the political liberalization.

The Arab world, including the Arab Gulf states, is experiencing several pressures to embark on universal political reform. The most important of these are external pressures that come in the form of initiatives and recipes for desired change. The most recent is the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI), which is a new US initiative for the West Asian region. It is the culmination of Bush's endeavor to spread democracy and freedom in the Middle East, and Colin Powell's call for an American-Middle Eastern partnership. The US initiative has adopted the three main objectives mentioned in the reports. These are: a) Promoting democracy and good governance, b) Building a knowledge-based society and c) Expanding economic opportunities<sup>14</sup>. In the field of democracy the initiative calls for supporting and promoting free elections in the countries of the region via technological assistance training in the field of parliamentary practices, activating women's role and participation, developing

independent private media, encouraging the states of civil society<sup>15</sup>.

The political liberalization in the Gulf since the first Gulf War is the process of institution building such as setting up of formal political institutions and/or institutionalized mechanism for political participation. This process of institutionalization creates favorable conditions for the establishment of a political pact, which, in turn, encourages the emergence of a process of democratic opening. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness among important members of the Gulf ruling families that the survival of their regimes requires the introduction of some real –and sometimes painful– reform. Indeed, as the Gulf ruling family’s remarkable ability to mobilize external and internal sources of power seems to have reached its limits, further steps towards political participation are supposedly needed. As a result, the Gulf Cooperation Council has embarked on some level of reforms; offering increased electoral participation, albeit within tight limits.

#### **Limits of political liberalisation:**

The diversity of the GCC polities underlines the complex challenge in analyzing the internal mechanisms of this sub-region; however, key similarities can be identified. An overarching theme is that change has consistently been initiated by the elites themselves and has taken the character of controlled liberalization rather than a substantive shift in power relationships. A process of democratization, therefore, has not been established<sup>16</sup>. There is a substantial lag between Arab countries and other regions in term of participatory governance. The Arab states have the lowest freedom score out of the world’s seven regions<sup>17</sup>. The *Arab Human Development Report 2004* has noted that despite variations from country to country, rights and freedoms enjoyed in the Arab world remain poor. It goes on to stress that while most Arab countries have elected parliaments, their election is little more than a ritual, representing a purely formal application of a constitutional entitlement. The modern Arab state, notes the report, is a “black hole” state “which nothing moves and from which nothing escape”<sup>18</sup>. In some parts of the Arab world, democracy simply doesn’t exist— because, in the eyes of Islamic radicalism, it is incompatible with Islam. This is clear and unambiguous. Elsewhere in the Arab world, democracy is indeed in the constitution. In such cases, things are much less clear and very ambiguous. There is a huge gap between theory and practice in this regard. In virtually all-Arab states, democracy in practice is no more than a theatrical production<sup>19</sup>.

The process of political reform in the Arab Gulf States faces a number of obstacles. Some leaders do not want to bring about the necessary political transformations for fear of being accused of doing so as a result of foreign pressures. Also, the ruling elites tend to reject political pluralism because it will affect the way they rule and control affairs. Currently, the GCC ruling elites are the firm masters of the political domain and are able to control the pace and direction of reform, although Kuwait seems to have entered into a new and uncharted phase<sup>20</sup>. The absence of an organized and efficient political opposition and the lack of party leaderships that enjoy the support of popular and sustainable constituencies have led instead to the appearance of sectarian, tribal and familial leadership. This has meant the absence of effective public pressure on the political authority that will make it responsive reform measures<sup>21</sup>. As elsewhere in the Middle East, the major ideological divide in the Arab Gulf is between liberals and Islamists. Liberalism in the Gulf has generally shifted over the last few decades from an initial broad commitment to Arab nationalism and socialism to economic and political liberalization. In Kuwait, the liberal electoral defeat in 1981 was the turning point, causing the government to worry about growing Islamist strength. To reconstitute themselves, they moved toward political liberalization (advocating women’s suffrage, legalization of political parties, and restraints on the ruling family, for example separation of the Prime Minister and Crown Prince) and toward economic liberalization, embracing the market. In Saudi Arabia, liberals in the Arab nationalist era were largely marginalized and did not become a significant force until they were able to recast their concerns in Islamic (although not Islamist) terms. There the first turning point was the Gulf War and the petitions

that followed. The second was 9/11, although it took until 2003 and the wave of political violence inside Saudi Arabia for the Saudi government to become more receptive to the now moderate liberal position, and to see its utility as a possible way to help balance Islamist radicals. They did this by encourage a moderate center comprised primarily of moderate Islamists, but including some moderate liberals. The Saudi liberal position on political participation is similar to that of liberals elsewhere in the Gulf: an enthusiastic embrace of the concept and a call for more participatory institutions, elections, judicial reform, increased transparency and, in Saudi Arabia, limitations on the political control of the religious establishment.

In the Smaller Gulf states, liberal voices have been present but muted. In Qatar, for example, from the 1950s on, whenever dissent has emerged, it has had a liberal component: a call for public participation and transparency. After the Gulf War, Qatar, like the other Gulf states, experienced a push for political liberalization: in 1991, some fifty Qataris signed a petition to the Amir calling for an elected council with some real legislative and investigatory powers and for a constitution that guaranteed democratic freedoms. The liberals have shown resilience over the years, reinventing themselves ideologically and exhibiting organisational talent and talent and tactical ability: developing allies while retaining their core support, accepting government support when it is offered, and seizing opportunities such as the aftermath of 9/11 to attack their opponents. Unfortunately for them, the Islamists have also shown similar adaptive abilities.

The major competition liberals face comes from Islamists. At the two extremes of political openness and political closure, Kuwait, the Islamists have shown political skill over the years, taking over associations and forming alliances along both lines of interest (reaching out to poorer Kuwaitis and less influential urban families, closed out of merchant politics) and lines of identity (forming alliance with Bedouin and even the Shi'a). In terms of political agenda, Islamists have focused on *shari'a* the 1950s and 1960s to balance the Arab nationalists, but shifted position when the Islamic groups gained strength. After the 1976 Assembly suspension, the government turned for support to the then apolitical Islamic groups, such as the Social Reform Society, which had not criticized the dissolution<sup>22</sup>. This raised the government's concern, and after the reconstitution of the Assembly following the 1990 invasion, the Amir turned to the liberals to form a government and began supporting liberal positions. In Kuwait, then, the government has handled the Islamists in more or less the same way it has handled the liberals: approaching them when the liberals seemed threatening, distancing themselves when the Islamists became too strong. In Saudi Arabia the regime established a different dynamic, with different results. Historically, the government has achieved a degree of hegemony by successfully insisting that every important question be cast in religious terms. Religion set the parameters of political discussion. Setting the parameters meant that the regime could decide what issues were debated. Hegemony gave the regime a tactical advantage: liberal opponents were thrown off until they found a way to cast their own arguments in an Islamic framework. While the Saudi regime was hegemonic in controlling the parameters, it was not unchallenged within the parameters it set. Religious authority remained the only legitimate authority, but state religious authorities were not the only authorities. In Qatar, the distinction between the two camps is less clear, Islamism and liberalism were never separate, nor Islam really subordinate. Perhaps because Islamist discourse was neither marginalized nor hegemonic, Islamists have not made great stride in Qatar.

The weakness of institutionalism in the political structure is one of the main obstacles to the process of political reform in the GCC States. In these states personality cults and unilateral political decisions supersede the working of political structures. Ruling authorities dominate the mechanism of political decision-making. Despite the existence of parliamentary institutions, which are supposed to have the main role in passing different legislative laws, these institutions are weak, since most bills come as proposals from the government. The governments apply pressure on parliamentary groups to make them pass the desired bills. Moreover, the monarchical regimes have the ability to dissolve

parliaments at will. Thus, the principle of separation of power has become a mere formality<sup>23</sup>. It has become axiomatic in comparative politics that with an increase in economic freedom and the rise in the level of socio-economic status, a middle class will develop and demand accountability, paving the way for democratic opening<sup>24</sup>. Yet, the GCC States appear resistant to that paradigm. The West Asia, writes John Waterbury, has “an environment singularity inhospitable to legal pluralism and democracy.” Armed conflict (which enable the state to oppress its citizens) and an oppressive and pervasive military and intelligence apparatus (sometimes called the *mukhabarat* state) are certainly factors that impede democratization. Waterbury also adds another critical factor, what he terms “the ambivalent middle class.” Whereas in many countries the middle class supports democratization as it develops its own priorities that are not always in line with those of the state, in the West Asia in general, and the Gulf in particular, a huge portion of the middle class is often made up of bureaucrats who are employed by and are dependent on the state. Even members of the private sector are often beholden to the state for contracts and access, in what has been termed an “alliance for profits.” The presence of disenfranchised foreign workers is also obstacle to real democracy and liberalization in many of the Gulf countries<sup>25</sup>. Non- nationals have no role in any of the current liberalization policies in the GCC. They cannot vote, and their voices are nearly invisible in the liberalized political space created in the past few years. If the GCC countries do not address this issue, which they are unlikely to do, any talk by Gulf leaders of liberalization may be, as they say in the West Asian region, *kalamfadi*- empty words.

Democratization can never take place without enfranchising this population, and certainly liberalization can never take place without opening up political space for it. There are a number of stumbling blocks on the way that will hinder the process of change like the absence of a reformist, national effective political opposition, the fragility of democratic culture, the lack of concern over human right and the absence of an effective role for women. Besides, there is also the continuing strength of traditional structure and tribal, sectarian and familiar allegiances, all of which may be major obstacles to any major structural change<sup>26</sup>. Women’s suffrage has been hailed in the Western press as a key indicator of political liberalization. In the Gulf, however, it can be more accurately viewed as part of a legitimizing move on the part of the rulers that plays primarily to a Western audience. It has suffrage movement, Kuwait, was among the last to extend suffrage to women. Women in Bahrain, Qatar and Oman embraced suffrage enthusiastically. Women in Saudi Arabia have voiced interest in having a role in whatever participatory institutions emerge. In those states where open public discussion is allowed, notably Kuwait, the status of women is one of the most important topics of debate between Islamists and liberals. If women in the Gulf, insofar as it extends to women’s suffrage, generally see political liberalization, as a good thing, the record on economic liberalization is more ambiguous. Economic Liberalisation and cutbacks in state employment fall disproportionately on women who have benefited from professional employment. The Saudis perhaps have grasped this and in 2004 lifted a ban that kept women from taking jobs in many fields and set aside land for an exclusive female industrial city, proposed by a group of Saudi businesswomen<sup>27</sup>.

Youth unemployment is a driving force behind economic liberalization throughout the Gulf. Saudi Arabia’s case is not a typical. The unemployment rate among Saudis is officially around 15 percent but some estimates place it as high as 30 percent; among new graduates it is doubtless higher<sup>28</sup>. With more than half the population under the age of fifteen, policy-makers see a crisis looming. In 2002, Saudi Arabia passed legislation-requiring companies with 20 or more employees to have 30 percent Saudi nationals, with the ambitious and probably unrealistic goal of reducing the proportion of expatriate workers to 20 percent in a decade<sup>29</sup>. Similar moves have occurred in other Gulf States. College graduates have learned to develop personal networks that cut across family; tribal and other lines and can to a degree draw on those networks to mobilize people on political issues. This may increase as a generation receiving higher education largely at home rather than abroad emerges.

The shared experience of this generation has created a national arena for politics and has forced all who wish to appeal to this generation to cast their issues “in general policy terms, as opposed to personal patronage terms”<sup>30</sup>. This is not to suggest that members of a new generation do not identify along lines of class or sect, rather that they will have perhaps a greater ability to build bridges alliance across lines, perhaps using the ideology and organization of generation as a fulcrum. Such skills would probably make for more effective participatory politics, although it is not clear how welcoming those institutions are to the young (the Gulf’s most established participatory institution, Kuwait’s National Assembly, is certainly dominated by an older generation)<sup>31</sup>. But this outlook could also make them more effective underground organizers.

Expatriates (who are excluded) and the local opposition with whom they develop ties are in these circumstances unlikely to embrace polite participatory local politics. It is even the government rather than the opposition that brings expatriates back into the political equation, to strengthen its hand against domestic opponents. For example, in the weeks leading up to the 2002 elections in Bahrain, thousand of expatriates, primarily Syrian, Yemenis and Baluchis in the armed forces, police and intelligence services were granted full citizenship, then ordered to vote. More than 10,000 Persian *bidun* were similarly naturalized. In July 2002 a new citizenship law allowed individuals from neighboring countries, who would be mostly Sunni, to obtain Bahrain citizenship<sup>32</sup>. This is not the norm, certainly; but it is not beyond possibility in some other countries, such as Qatar, where citizenship has been granted to some on the basis of political orientation, or the UAE, where the government, in part under US pressure, has granted citizenship to hundreds of Palestinians. Such expatriates whose political participation rests solely on patronage and who are not socialized into local political norms are unlikely to embrace political liberalization as an ideal.

### **Conclusion:**

The Arab revolution contagion reached the shores of the Gulf, when protests took place against authoritarian rule, rising inflation and high unemployment in Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries did not experience the scale of protests seen in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen<sup>33</sup>. The ‘Arab Spring’ has generated reformist pressures and divergent regime responses within the Gulf monarchies. Although the recent pro-democracy movement across the Arab world by all account is home-grown, the external factors and forces such as the globalization trend, the development of information and communication technology, the democratic discourse, unleashed played no small role in creating conditions for such popular upsurge across the Arab world. Following the over through Tunisian and Egyptian president the movement has already triggered mass protest even in the GCC States, notably Bahrain in February 2011<sup>34</sup>.

The global wave of democratization is helping the process of opening up Arab polities, as is the prominent role being played by international and Arab human rights advocates such as Amnesty International, Middle East Watch, and the Arab Organization for Human Rights. These organizations are making it more and more difficult for Arab elites to draw upon their traditional coercive impulse and apparatus. Economic globalization and technological change (including, variously, such things as fax machines, television satellite dishes, and the global computer Internet) are generally held to have accelerated this process by breaking down international barriers, loosening the authoritarian grips of governments over the free flow of information, and empowering grassroots democratic activists. Among them are steady, even if modest, economic development, and a greater measure of social equity. Without these, the roads to democracy will be quiet rocky and reversals likely. In the end, the path to democracy in the Gulf is far more tortuous and uncertain than is often considered. Political liberalization and the wheels of democratization have started moving ahead but still there is a long way to go. It has been evident nearly everyday, but often with such slow progress that it seems imperceptible. Western economic pressure is a key force pushing the ruling elites to adopt reforms conducive to

good governance<sup>35</sup>. Economic openness implies a greater political transparency in decision-making. In the era of globalization, pressure for economic reform holds the potential to change business culture in the long term, which, in turn, will lead to pressure for changes in the traditional system of governance<sup>36</sup>. For the GCC states, the unanswerable question is whether this slow advance will suffice to mollify increasingly impatient citizens. The answer lies more in the resilience of and modifications to the relationship between rulers and ruled than in strategies imposed from the outside.

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