The GCC states: Participation, opposition, and the fraying of the social contract

J.E. Peterson

THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE

The Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States is a ten-year multidisciplinary global research programme. It focuses on topics such as globalization and the repositioning of the Gulf States in the global order, capital flows, and patterns of trade; specific challenges facing carbon-rich and resource-rich economic development; diversification, educational and human capital development into post-oil political economies; and the future of regional security structures in the post-Arab Spring environment.

The Programme is based in the LSE Department of Government and led by Professor Danny Quah and Dr Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. The Programme produces an acclaimed working paper series featuring cutting-edge original research on the Gulf, published an edited volume of essays in 2011, supports post-doctoral researchers and PhD students, and develops academic networks between LSE and Gulf institutions.

At the LSE, the Programme organizes a monthly seminar series, invitational breakfast briefings, and occasional public lectures, and is committed to five major biennial international conferences. The first two conferences took place in Kuwait City in 2009 and 2011, on the themes of Globalisation and the Gulf, and The Economic Transformation of the Gulf. The next conference will take place at the LSE in March 2013, on the theme of The Arab Spring and the Gulf: Politics, Economics, and Security.

www.lse.ac.uk/LSEKP/

The GCC States: Participation, Opposition and the Fraying of the Social Contract

Research Paper, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States

J. E. Peterson

mail@JEPeterson.net

The GCC States: Participation, Opposition and the Fraying of the Social Contract

J. E. PETERSON

Abstract

While the popular discontent visibly sweeping the Arab world in 2011–12 has not had the same impact on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, there have been serious repercussions and doubts have been raised about the legitimacy of the political systems. Causes of unrest include economic grievances, sectarian discrimination, and frustration at the lack of effective political participation. Many citizens reject the validity of existing avenues for informal participation and demand reform of the system and more substantial participation in it. Civil society remains restricted by government obstructions. The window to public advocacy of change and even replacement of existing regimes has been opened, particularly in Bahrain. Social media play an increasing role in disseminating ideas and information, in circulating grievances, and in organizing demonstrations. Ruling families have been slow and reluctant to respond, thus threatening to unravel the implicit social contract between rulers and ruled. Tensions are not likely to be resolved in the near future.

1. INTRODUCTION

The six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, or the Gulf states) are all authoritarian monarchies. They differ somewhat from other Arab monarchies in Jordan and Morocco in that the ruling families arise from the tribal environment that continues to predominate in Gulf societies, although the importance of that tribal context has been reduced drastically in the political arena. Nevertheless, the twelve ruling families (constituting the leadership of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates [UAE] plus the other five GCC states) enjoy relatively strong legitimacy because they are an integral element of the 'traditional' political environment.[1]

There are many who would take issue with the above statement. Indeed, the popular discontent visibly sweeping the Arab world in 2011 has produced an explosion of opinions on the validity of the 'exceptionalism' of the Gulf states or, as a slightly larger group, the Arab monarchies. This is a subject that has been debated for many years, particularly during the period of Nasirism and the heyday of Arab secular ideologies and then again after the Iranian Revolution and the rise of Islamist politics. An implicit argument in favour of

---

[1] The term 'traditional' is highly imprecise but is used here to refer to the composition of society and the exercise of politics in the pre-oil era. Admittedly, it is susceptible to interpretation as representing a state in which society and politics remained static and unchanging before the oil era. In truth, traditional societies were constantly in a state of flux, even though the organizational and relational precepts remained essentially unaltered. Nevertheless, use of the term provides a useful prism with which to contrast social and political change in the oil era.

'exceptionalism' is that the point has been argued about this region for more than half a century.

At the same time, however, it cannot be denied that many of the same factors that spur popular opinions and at least potential dissent throughout the Arab world (and in many parts of the larger developing world as well) are also at work in the Gulf states. The unrest of 2011–12 in Bahrain – the hardest-hit of the Gulf states – was provoked in large part by economic factors related to discrimination against the majority Shiʿah, both al-Baharinah and Persians. Sectarian discrimination was also the cause of protests in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Oman's demonstrations were triggered initially by economic grievances, while the arrests and convictions of bloggers in the UAE were prompted by complaints about the lack of political participation on the one hand and by the government's fears of growing Islamist strength on the other.

Still, it is clear that the emphasis on denial of the 'exceptionalism' argument relies heavily on the concept of the rentier state, which is only one of the two pillars of regime legitimacy. It may be said that the Gulf monarchies owe their authority to a combination of what may be called 'traditional' legitimacy and 'modern' legitimacy. Traditional legitimacy derives from the tribal and cultural environment in which these states developed and that their societies continue to embrace. The ruling families form an integral part of the tribal system and their status is accepted generally as natural. The culture demands respect for the father as head of the family – and, by extension, elders of the community – whose word should be final and unquestioned. The ruler's position as head of state is an extrapolation of that patriarchal principle, that is, the ruler is the father of the state and its citizens, just as the tribal *shaykh* is the father of the tribe and its members.

> One school of thought holds that continuity is the predominant force in the Gulf states. The [Arab Gulf states] … are essentially at the pre-modern stage of development as they have been for centuries. They are still in essence traditional societies wrapped in a façade of modernity. … Indeed, the net impact of the oil wealth of the 1970s and the 1990s has been the consolidation of the existing medieval order. … Tribalism, traditionalism and even unhealthy sectarianism are back and seem to be decidedly stronger. … The [Gulf states] have been cogently resistant to change and most probably will remain so for years to come. (Abdulla 2010: 12–13)

At the same time, it can be argued this return to retrogressive conservatism is but one phase in a longer-term process of gradual and inevitable change. Thus, at a more fundamental

level, inevitable decline in the acceptance of traditional legitimacy has been ameliorated, if not countered, by the regimes' reliance on 'modern' legitimacy. This is the assumption of the central political tenet of rentier state theory: the citizenry accept the authority of the state, as well as the denial of their formal political participation, because the state provides security – both domestic and external – and a comprehensive distribution of the rent (oil income). In short, it fulfils the material expectations that states are expected to. Obviously, this requirement is easiest to fulfil when oil prices, and thus state incomes, are high. It is equally obvious that as societies change and citizens become better educated and increasingly exposed to the outside world, the denial of political rights becomes less acceptable.

According to the view that change is the predominant factor in the Gulf states, it follows that the rapid pace of deep socioeconomic change produces serious challenges for Gulf regimes.

> These states are pregnant with all types of changes, some deep-rooted and structural and some superficial and cosmetic. … The largely traditional and conservative ways of life have been almost completely replaced. … A more modern, urban and distinctly affluent society is coming into being. … The [negative effects of change] include the unequal distribution of oil wealth, a considerable amount of psychological dislocation and disorientation resulting in increasing social alienation, growth of a highly individualistic culture, conspicuous consumption, a deepening of dependency and the presence of large number of foreigners. … The [Gulf states] have experienced an 'avalanche of changes' which have engulfed policies, societies, infrastructure, values and economies, all of which are converting the [Gulf states] into postmodern societies geared to the world economy. (Abdulla 2010: 14–15)

Embracing this paradigm of change, many observers contend that the legitimacy of the Gulf states is tenuous and has been stretched dangerously by the Arab unrest of 2011. Even more, it has been said that the 'triumphalism' in the GCC about escaping the turbulence and thus being able to provide Arab leadership is unwarranted. For example, a piece posted on *Foreign Policy*'s website in late 2011 contends that 'History and current trends suggest that the GCC's current leading role will prove the exception, not the rule, and likely won't survive the coming years' (Lynch 2011). An article in *Foreign Affairs*, also in 2011, remarked that 'Buoyed by high oil prices, the other oil exporters have been able to head off potential opposition by distributing resources through increased state salaries, higher subsidies for consumer goods, new state jobs, and direct handouts to citizens' (Gause 2011: 85). Another, noting the relationship between taxation and representation, contended that 'In the Middle East today, oil-funded leaders typically respond to demands for greater accountability by

offering new handouts, lowering taxes, or both – and this usually works' (Ross 2011: 3–4).[2] The problem with postulating that the Gulf regimes stave off opposition by bribing their populations is that it ignores the still-evident power of traditional legitimacy.

It is undeniable that the traditional environment has undergone massive change in the 45–75 years that have marked the oil era. Traditional politics no longer suffice as the sole means of maintaining power. Societies have expanded, government and administration have become more elaborate, relationships between members of society are more diffuse, and traditional patron–client relationships have been partially supplanted by newer, emerging relationships based on education, occupation and professional or vocational interests. One consequence has been the introduction of formal political institutions in all six GCC states on the national and local levels to give the semblance of a sharing of power or at least of popular participation in the political process. But the effectiveness and writ of these institutions remain extremely limited.

While the parliamentary experience in the GCC cannot be written off as mere window-dressing, it is inescapable that the Gulf states remain authoritarian states and that their hereditary rulers and accompanying ruling families ultimately retain unchallenged control. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that a number of fissures old and new have emerged, particularly over the last two decades, in that authoritarian wall that permit a significant level of participation and engagement in more informal yet still meaningful ways. Progress on this front has been slow and in Bahrain, and to a lesser extent in Oman, the experience of the Arab uprising of 2011 has seriously challenged the notion that Gulf authoritarianism is mellowing.

Ruling families in the Gulf have taken note of the process of changing circumstances and expectations and generally have offered at least rhetoric that acknowledges the necessity of reforms. Shaykh Nasir al-Muhammad Al Sabah, while prime minister of Kuwait in mid-2011, told the press that 'We believe that the reform process in all the (Gulf) countries is an important and crucial matter. It is not possible to realize growth and stability in any country without economic and political reforms and to realize welfare of the peoples' (*al-Hayat* 2011). This sentiment was echoed by Qatar's prime minister (and foreign minister), Shaykh Hamad b. Jasim b. Jabr Al Thani, who remarked in an interview that the GCC states were not immune

---

[2] In the same vein is the remark that 'First, and foremost, the GCC states have a lot of money. That may not buy love, but it certainly does give them something to work with, especially as energy prices stay high. Most have responded to the Arab uprisings by throwing huge amounts of money at their own people in order to blunt the demands for political change' (Ross 2011: 3–4). To be fair, Lynch (2011) also notes that 'The wealthy Gulf states seem relatively immune to the popular mobilizations which have challenged most of the other regimes in the region. Advocates of the Gulf exceptionalism stance point to small citizen populations, huge government employment and patronage opportunities, and monarchical legitimacy as buffers against popular outrage.'

to popular revolts but the relationship between the people and the rulers in these countries was stronger than in other countries in the region. When asked if the Arab uprising was applicable to the Gulf states, Shaykh Hamad replied:

> My testimony would not be complete because I am part of the system in the Gulf countries. But I can't say that GCC countries are hundred per cent immune. The truth is that the GCC has always been flexible. The relationships between the ruler and the citizens in the region is different from other countries. There is keenness to preserve the traditions and customs and more communication and understanding between the top and the bottom. (*Akhbar al-Yawm* 2011)

It is instructive to examine briefly how the political scene in the Gulf has been transformed over the last 40–70 years. The evolutionary path of the Gulf states can be described as having moved through three phases. The hereditary leadership in the first phase, that of the pre-oil era, was largely unquestioned but the effective power of that leadership was constrained by a variety of factors. Among them were external influences (particularly the role of the British in most of the states), the poverty of the polity and therefore the rulers' dependence on cooperation with prominent merchants, the ability of family factions and tribal groups simply to move out of the geographical limits of a ruler's control, and – at least in theory – the consensual nature of tribal politics.

The introduction of the oil era, from the beginning of exploitation through full independence and beyond into the 1970s and early 1980s, constituted the second phase. As recipients of oil rents, rulers and their families quickly acquired vastly extended control over their states and used that wealth to create dependency across the breadth of their citizenry. Elites were co-opted through government appointments and especially through expanded commercial opportunities. The distribution of benefits derived from oil wealth in the creation of physical and social infrastructure served to ensure the loyalty as well as dependence of the population as a whole. Above all, ruling families exerted strong control over their populations by such means as determining advancement in the civil service and military according to loyalty; parcelling out financial opportunities and benefits through a wide network of elites, supporters and constituent groups; maintaining severe censorship of all media; and prohibiting public dissent and sanctioning private dissenters.

The third phase, the maturing of oil regimes from the 1990s until the present, has seen a certain loosening of the strong and often heavy-handed authoritarianism exercised in the second phase by rulers and ruling families. An educated, sophisticated and well-to-do middle class that is not directly dependent on the regime has burgeoned in all six countries. This

middle class in all six countries exhibits an undercurrent of yearning for greater transparency and effective legislative institutions. Yet the ruling families have resisted effective power-sharing in all states. Formal political institutions, such as parliamentary or consultative bodies, serve some useful functions but their effective role remains severely restricted.

The evolution of more 'traditional' informal institutions and the cautious adoption or tolerance of newer ones has come to the fore in this third phase. Governments' 'big brother' attitude to control over media and the expression of opinion has gradually loosened, assisted by the spread of satellite television and the Internet. The institution of the *majlis* or *diwaniyah* continues to play a limited but useful role in legitimation. But elements of civil society have taken hold, particularly as society changes and new networks of association are formed to complement traditional ones of family, tribe and sect. In Kuwait and Bahrain, political groupings or societies have been tolerated and these have begun to form nascent political parties along ideological as well as primordial lines.

Finally, factionalism within ruling families has taken on an added dimension. While these families have always exhibited widely divergent opinions internally on how to exercise power – and on occasion have resorted to dramatic strategies to secure succession – divergence has appeared to deepen in the last decade or two. In most of these states, the existence of opposing views on democratization has become apparent within the families and a new generation of rulers in some states has produced more 'liberal' leadership to a certain extent. Ruling family factions have sought alliances with other elite groups and, as in the case of Kuwait, allegedly have been manifested in the orchestration of public opposition to members of opposing factions, especially in the Majlis al-Umma (National Assembly).[3]

The structure of the Gulf states regimes, employing essentially authoritarian characters, seems to continue without serious challenge. Formal political participation is extremely limited, even in Kuwait with its parliament. Consequently, political participation is informal at best in most cases and political engagement of the citizenry with their governments is tentative and supplicatory. There is a changing dynamic to such activity but there seems to be movement in both positive and negative directions, as is shown below.

---

[3] An alternative scheme of stages has been advanced by Abdulkhaleq Abdulla: 'Since the end of the Second World War the Gulf has experienced four major phases: pre-modernity in 1950–70, the first stage of modernity in 1971–90, the second stage of modernity in 1990–2010, and finally the global moment of 2010 onwards' (Abdulla 2010: 7ff).

2. STAGES IN THE EVOLUTION OF GULF POLITICS

Pre-oil politics in the Gulf states was characterized by leadership that was in an almost literal sense more paternalistic than authoritarian. Its foundation lay in the notion of the ruler serving as the 'father of his country'. This paternalistic leadership presumably derived from the role of the *shaykh* over his tribe, which mimicked the position of the father within the family. The extension of this attitude to the ruler owed much to Gulf society's respect for elders as well as the persistence of a 'traditional' corporate entity: the ruler, like the *shaykh* and like the father, personified the bonds and identity of the community and held responsibility for safeguarding that community's interest, as well as exercising authority within it. The consensual relationship between ruler and ruled was facilitated by the compactness of society. There were personal relations of one sort or another, as well as family ties and corporate links, between all members of society.

Leadership was exercised directly by the ruler, often by decisions reached in open court after ascertaining the opinions of his advisers, family members and other notables of the local society. The ruler's word – or conclusion – was sufficient to arbitrate disputes and bind the state to relations with other states (both neighbouring and more external). Once a ruler announced his decision, dissent could not be brooked. His word was final and opposing it generally meant expulsion from the community.

The onset of the oil era produced changes. The accretion of oil revenues to the ruler not only strengthened his control over the state but also intensified the role of the ruler as benefactor and distributor of state expenditure. In addition to establishing allowances for members of the ruling family, the state – as personified by the ruler – created rudimentary ministries (such as public works). The government agencies served another function besides carrying out initial development projects: their formation was often directly tied to the establishment of fiefdoms for senior ruling family members.

Other well-placed figures of society, particularly heads of merchant families, benefited from government programs intended to distribute wealth. These programs generally centred on government development contracts as well as land sales and purchases. At the same time, the foundations of welfare societies were created as a result of the rulers acting in their traditionally expected paternal role.

In this way, the 'traditional' political roles were reinforced through the liberating effect of additional income. But the end result, particularly as oil revenues increased exponentially with growing production, was an intensification of the power of rulers and their families. The gap between ruler and ruled, particularly the elites of the society, had never been very wide, but

the chasm broadened with the oil era. Ruling families were increasingly set off from the rest of society and became castes to which no non-members could possibly aspire.

A measure of limited 'consultative' participation by the elite remained, principally through personal ties to the ruler or close relatives, or exercised in *majlis*es or *diwaniyah*s. Participation by most citizens, circumscribed at best in the past, was rendered almost entirely supplicatory. The open *majlis*, to which everyone had access, frequently became little more than a venue for receiving petitions from individuals (including expatriates as well as citizens) for a job, expenses for a medical trip abroad, or similar benefits. The so-called 'desert democracy' was thereby transformed into a televised opportunity for the ruler to show his connection to and approachability by the people.

At the same time, the status of the ruler as the father of his people was given strong and deliberate emphasis. He, it was postulated, 'knew best for his people' and therefore his word was absolute. The state, which was rapidly becoming a tangible organ with a differentiated hierarchy and growing bureaucracy, was the instrument for carrying out the ruler's commands. Its role vis-à-vis the people was to provide the benefits that the state – that is, the ruler – felt were needed and appropriate. Effective participation was restricted to employment of the newly educated citizens in key government positions, where they could participate in shaping the choices from which the ruler would make his decision.

At the same time, the state began to exercise control over the expression and activities of its people to an extent not seen before. In part, the solidification of states, the determination of national boundaries, and the issuing of passports and classification of citizens contributed to this process. Control extended to thought. Ministries of 'information' (*sic*) determined what should be published in newspapers and aired on radio and television. The access of the citizen to external sources of news and ideas was subject to strict censorship. Educational curricula followed a rigid government line that extolled the virtues of the state and excoriated any ideological deviations.

Kuwait and Bahrain created institutions of formal political participation upon their full independence, more as a tool to demonstrate their legitimacy as viable independent states than as a genuine initial step towards power-sharing.[4] Kuwait's Amir ʿAbdullah al-Salim created the National Assembly shortly after independence as a tangible proof that Kuwait was a real state; that is, it must be so because only sovereign states had elected parliaments. The National Assembly has had a chequered history and has been suspended a number of times. It has not

---

[4] The literature on formal participatory institutions in the Gulf states is voluminous and cannot be cited here. This

served as a true parliament, either in its structure or in its operation, but its elected representatives fulfil many of the basic intentions of representative democracy and even the Islamist/liberal confrontation is played out in part in public debate.

Bahrain, which acquired full independence ten years after Kuwait, followed Kuwait's example, both in the drafting of a constitution and in the creation of a national assembly to bolster its image as a sovereign state. The experiment was a dismal failure since the government permanently suspended the National Assembly after just two years and no attempt was made to resurrect it for nearly three decades. The new bicameral assembly (one elected and one appointed) created by King Hamad b. ʿIsa in 2002 was crafted to ensure that it would not be able to oppose the government as had happened in the early 1970s, as well as ensure that the country's majority Shiʿah would never have a parliamentary majority.

The other Gulf states were content with only creating consultative bodies. These often served in effect as formalized *majlis*es through the appointment of community leaders and educated citizens. Thus they allowed a combination of formal and informal participation to the elites of the community. Oman gradually extended universal suffrage to its body, the UAE has broadened its narrow electoral base cautiously, and Qatar has promised a national assembly but has yet to deliver. Only Saudi Arabia's Majlis al-Shura remains fully appointed. In addition, elections were instituted for municipal councils in some of the states.

In the last stage of evolution, as the Gulf states grew in confidence and durability, they became more formal, more diversified and, at the same time, more impersonal. In part, this was a function of mushrooming growth in the indigenous population, occasioned by improved health care and better standards of living. The sheer numbers of people meant it was no longer possible to know everyone else in society. Such activities as visiting one's parents every day and meeting regularly with one's peers became more difficult because of the press of time and the pressure of traffic. As a consequence, personal ties became more fragmented and select.

At the same time, all the Gulf states experienced a massive influx of non-citizens, including northern Arabs, Asians and Westerners. All of these had different but significant impacts on the composition of society and political attitudes. Arab expatriates were favoured as Arabic- speakers and because of cultural similarities, but also suspect because of their potential for ideological influences upon the citizenry. The prevalence of Palestinian teachers in the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, led to Gulf school children being intensely imbued with the Palestinian plight.

---

brief discussion follows in large part from Peterson (1988) and the update, Peterson (2006).

In terms of structure, the state produced a certain maturation of the machinery of government. The few scattered agencies that marked the initial phase of government developed into a burgeoning trend of formal institutions – ministries, royal court organizations, security organs, audit bureaus and so on – as well as a growing bureaucracy. As citizens achieved more education and population growth meant more demand for jobs for nationals, the proportion of citizens in all levels of government positions grew – not just at the top and at the bottom. The increasing proportion of government employees vis-à-vis private sector workers naturally served to increase dependence on the state.

Furthermore, the state was able to exert considerable control over its citizens through effective intelligence and policing. Dissent was tolerated no more than it was in the Arab republics. Admittedly, treatment of dissidents or critics was generally much gentler: 'errant children' were rehabilitated and encouraged to return to the fold – co-opted, in other words. As one example, a Kuwaiti who fled his country after involvement in a plot to assassinate the Shah of Iran during the latter's state visit to the emirate was subsequently captured with a group of rebels in Oman. After Kuwait successfully pressed for his return, he was not jailed but sent to the United States to pursue his PhD, and then joined Kuwait University and later served as minister of education.

But even as the state was becoming stronger and more capable, elements of social change began to reduce the state's (legitimate) hold on its citizens. The state replaced other, more traditional, corporate bodies as the main source of authority and identity for nationals, as demonstrated by the ubiquitous displays of flags and pictures of rulers at sporting events. But the spread of education, especially abroad, led to new attitudes regarding responsible government. The old acceptance of paternalism was being tempered with newer critical attitudes demanding government answerability and obligations.

The advent of satellite television and the Internet increased exposure to conflicting ideas and ideologies, even for those individuals who were not highly educated or who had not left their villages, and these innovations accelerated critical attitudes towards government. At the same time, new connections and bonds emerged to complement if not replace older ones. These included such groups as professional societies, alumni groups, chambers of commerce, and avocational groups such as scuba-divers, radio hams and amateur musicians.

3. INFORMAL AVENUES OF ENGAGEMENT

Some avenues for informal participation have existed traditionally. To be sure, most of these avenues, or means of access, were restricted to the elites. Rulers were not absolute and most depended on consensus within their families – immediate family members in the first instance and then the wider body of the ruling family – and on consultation with leading merchants and religious figures. Before oil, administration of the state and particularly the conduct of any warfare required loans from the important merchants, who then claimed a say in commercial and other policies. In Saudi Arabia, the Al Saʿud had formed a virtual partnership with the Al al-Shaykh, the descendants of Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahhab who formulated the Islamic reform movement that prevails in the kingdom today. The Al Saʿud also formed political and marriage alliances with key families such as Ibn Jiluwi and al-Sudayr.

From another angle, and to return to a point made at the beginning of this paper, the traditional institution of the *majlis* or *diwaniyah* continues to play a political, as well as social, role in the Gulf states. Its appellation of 'desert democracy' was in recognition of the ready accessibility of leaders, from the ruler of the state down to the *shaykh*s of tribes, to their constituents. Even today, in most of the states, senior members of the ruling family, senior government officials, prominent merchants and other notables hold weekly or more frequent 'open houses' in which anyone can come to meet them, discuss a wide range of matters, and often receive a meal. To be sure, few venture to say anything too critical of their host or the government – and many of these *majlis*es focus on non-political subjects such as poetry or are simply social gatherings.

Nevertheless, they provide feedback on popular opinion that on occasion has led to reversals of government policy. In the mid-1980s, the government enacted an income tax that applied only to expatriates. Merchants were shocked, since either their employees would leave because their income was no longer attractive or companies would become less profitable if higher wages were paid. The matter was raised in the *majlis*es of prominent merchants, provincial governors and key members of the royal family. Some 24 hours later, the decree was rescinded in an unacknowledged display of political feedback (interviews in Saudi Arabia 1988). In Kuwait, the elected members of the National Assembly hold *diwaniyah*s that serve much the same function as the constituent meetings that Western MPs hold.

Still, it should be noted that as a forum for regular consultation and advice, the *majlis* or *diwayniyah* has declined markedly in recent decades. Society has become more complex, modern life has become more hectic (allowing less time for face-to-face or casual meetings), and formal government procedures and hierarchical chains of policy-planning have replaced

informal discussions. The *majlis* or *diwaniyah* is often little more than a social occasion, where men gather in the evenings, drink tea and exchange views and information. It may be an important socializing ritual but generally it carefully stays clear of discussion of sensitive political issues, let alone of playing any organizing function.

4. CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society has emerged late in the Gulf and has been hobbled by the double impact of persistent corporate identities and strong state interference in what would otherwise be civil society activities. All societies or professional organizations require government approval for their establishment and many times this has been difficult or impossible to obtain. One reason is government suspicion that an organization may engage in political activities. But there are other reasons as well.

Charitable groups may be seen by the government as an implicit accusation that the state has not been fulfilling its responsibilities to all the community. Women's organizations were often created by ministries of social affairs as deliberate vehicles for educating women on their role in 'modern' society, preserving traditional – read 'paternalistic' – attitudes towards the state, or introducing or preserving craft work as a suitable economic endeavour for women. Governments have also sought to manipulate women's organizations for political purposes. These can be seen, for example, in Kuwait's creation of Islamist women's societies for their value 'not so much in perpetuating gender inequalities as in disseminating patriotic values and curbing the influence of fundamentalism' (al-Mughni 2001: 186).

Other groups, such as hobbyist clubs or graduate societies, may emerge as private initiatives but are enveloped by official support and control. The state universities remain under tight control and intellectual inquiry often is either not appreciated or discouraged by supervisors. Trade unions are either banned or hollow shells. Islamic organizations have been encouraged by states in the past, largely because they were perceived as means of reinforcing resistance to 'liberal' forces. In the post-9/11 world, however, states have become more suspicious of Islamists and have exercised tighter control over civil religious groups.

In counterpoint, it can be noted that the Gulf Forum, an annual gathering of intellectuals from all Gulf states to discuss pertinent social and economic issues, is alive and well. A first meeting in Muscat years ago foundered when Omani security demanded the minutes of the meeting; the group has not been back since. In recent years, it has settled on Bahrain as a regular venue, but the events of 2011 forced a move to Dubai (interviews in Kuwait, April 2012). On the other hand, it has been observed that civil society and political activism have

flourished in the last few years in Kuwait, with, for example, many younger people taking an active stance in visiting schools and other venues to explain the state's constitution and educate people about the necessity of voting (interviews in Kuwait, April 2012).

For all these reasons, the role of civil society in politics in the Gulf states remains minimal. As one Gulf national has noted, 'Civil society is emasculated as in much of the Third World' (interview in the Gulf, February 2012). States actively intervene in activities by enforcing restrictions, dictating articles of incorporation, influencing elections, and suspending organizations and detaining their leaders when there has been criticism of the state. This has been particularly prevalent in Bahrain, where the government is suspicious of professional organizations and has dismantled many and created pliant ones in their stead.

But it is also true in, for example, the UAE, where a petition calling for political reform in March 2011 was followed by the arrest of five activists. They were subsequently convicted and sentenced to prison terms, although later pardoned. Furthermore, the elected boards of the Jurists' Association and the Teachers' Association were disbanded in 2011 because some of their board members had supported petitions to the government. Another activist's arrest followed in March 2012. These actions, taken during the year of Arab unrest, had been preceded by earlier arrests in recent years, without explanation or resolution, of a prominent lawyer, a political scientist employed by the government, and various Islamists.

A mixture of formal and informal participation can be discerned in the development of political 'societies' as quasi-parties. Political parties are illegal in all six Gulf states. However, there is a vast distinction to be made between the absolute prohibition on political organization in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Oman, on the one hand, and the emergence of quasi-parties in Bahrain and Kuwait, generally referred to as 'societies'. In Bahrain, parties exist in all but name. These include both pro-government parties that are mostly Sunni Islamist, such as al-Asala and al-Minbar al-Islami. But there are opposition 'societies' as well, with the best known being al-Wifaq (al-Wefaq, a moderate Shi‹ah party), al-Haq (a more radical Shi‹ah party) and the National Democratic Action Society or Wa‹d (Waad, a secular mixed Sunni–Shi‹ah party embracing the remnants of older socialist, Ba‹thist and Marxist groups). Similar 'societies' are to be found in Kuwait although they have not quite reached the same degree of overtly political orientation. The best organized of these are Sunni Islamist groups, such as those of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, although the Islamic National Alliance Party, a Shi‹ah group, is also prominent. In 2006, a group of Islamists challenged the Kuwaiti ban on formal political parties by forming al-Ummah, a self-declared political party.

In both states, the societies constitute ideological coalitions pursuing electoral strategies.

That is, they operate in effect as political parties. At the same time, however, they may also serve as vehicles for sectarian advancement. In that sense, they are more like communal organizations and not fully fledged political parties. Both the Bahraini and Kuwaiti governments tolerate these societies (although in the case of Bahrain far less so for opposition parties after the spring of 2011), in part because pro-government societies provide support for and alliance with the governments within the parliamentary settings. In Kuwait, they are also alleged to be vehicles for carrying on differences within the ruling family.

While the 'societies' in both Kuwait and Bahrain operate within the context of those countries' national assemblies, political organization has not always been so straightforward. Popular dissatisfaction with Kuwait's administration resulted in the formation of ad hoc 'councils' in 1921 and 1938 by activists seeking to create a consultative form of political participation. Neither was effective or lasting. In the late 1950s, a group of secular nationalists, led by Ahmad al-Khatib and connected to the Arab Nationalists' Movement, challenged amiri authority by petition while their attempts to create elected councils were thwarted by the government. Nevertheless, a number of this group were elected to the first National Assembly in 1963 and their lineage can be traced down to the current set of 'liberals' (Peterson 1988: 28–37; Crystal 1990: 36–111).

Bahrain's experience with 'unauthorized' political protest and organization was even more intense than Kuwait's. Protests by Shi‹ah, Sunnis, students, pearl divers and Bahrain Petroleum Company workers took place at irregular intervals throughout the 1920s and 1930s. These activities culminated in the constitutional movement of 1938, which emerged in parallel with the one in Kuwait and similarly failed to achieve success. The period of 1953–6 witnessed a more serious and more tightly organized opposition movement known as the Committee of National Unity. Its modest success in gaining modification of some government policies was abruptly overturned in the aftermath of protests against the British participation in the Suez War of 1956, and its leaders were arrested, tried and imprisoned – either in Bahrain or on St Helena Island in the South Atlantic.

Subsequent activities in the 1960s were led by underground Arab nationalist, Ba‹thist and even Marxist groups. The more moderate activists among these were elected to the Constitutional Assembly in 1972 and the National Assembly in 1973. When the government found it was unable to work with the elected assembly, it suspended it in 1975. The effect of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–8 was to drive a wedge between Bahraini Sunnis and Shi‹ah, and the uprisings of the latter half of the 1990s and up to the present have been largely Shi‹ah in expression, although Sunni grievances against the

regime remained unresolved (Peterson 1988: 64-77; 2002; 2004; 2009).

Political organization, let alone sustained dissidence, in the other Gulf states has been far more muted. Opposition activities in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s centred on labour strikes at the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Aramco) and a series of arrests of mostly military personnel, as well as a few defections by air force pilots. Since the early 1990s, 'loyal opposition' has been expressed by a new wave of Islamist religious figures and liberal petitions. The large Shiʿah community of the Eastern Province historically has been oppressed by the government, and protests and violence have been a constant if irregular feature since the Iranian Revolution. At the far end of the spectrum, reactionary Islamist elements seized the Great Mosque of Makkah in 1979 and, inspired by Usamah b. Ladin, carried out a bloody insurgency in the kingdom in the mid-2000s.[5]

The arrest, detention and/or harassment of human rights activists and petitioners have been a recurring feature of the scene in Saudi Arabia since the early 2000s. Even when released from detention or house arrest, activists have found their freedoms curtailed and often their passports are not returned. In part, this policy has been in effect since the emergence of the Sahwah movement of conservative religious figures after the Kuwait War and of numerous petitions for reform presented to the king in the years following 9/11.

Prominent among those detained have been Islamist reformists such as ʿAbdullah al-Hamid, associated at one time with al-Sahwah, and Sulayman al-Rashudi, a retired judge, as well as liberals such as King Saud University professor Matruk al-Falih. Al-Falih was jailed several times in the 2000s while Rashudi and a group of fifteen other associated dissidents received jail terms of up to 30 years in November 2011 on charges of forming a secret organization and financing terrorism. Another activist and a former media professor, Saʿid Zuʿayr, was acquitted in February 2012 of similar charges but only after he had spent five years in jail. Six were arrested in March 2011 for allegedly planning protests inspired by Tunisia and Egypt. Still others faced heavy fines and bans on travel, including at least one woman who had committed the offence of driving.

Very muted and scattered opposition to the British presence took place in the UAE when still known as the Trucial States in the 1960s. In Oman, several small, leftist, nationalist fronts sought unsuccessfully to attack the government in the north, sometimes in coordination with the Marxist front that carried out the insurgency in Dhufar.

---

[5] These events have been covered in a number of more comprehensive books on Saudi Arabia. Among those works focusing more closely on opposition can be mentioned Hegghammer (2008, 2010), Hegghammer and Lacroix (2007), Lacroix (2004, 2005, 2011), Matthiesen (2010), Sager (2005) and Trofimov (2007).

5. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

A recent but increasingly important aspect of informal participation comes from the emergence of social media and their exponentially increasing use in the Gulf.[6] The use of social media has exploded in the Middle East, especially after the events of early 2011. The *Arab Social Media Report* reported that the number of Facebook users in the Arab world nearly doubled between April 2010 and April 2011 to more than 27 million, with more than 6 million users added in just the first three months of 2011. The highest proportion of users as a percentage of population tended to be in the GCC countries, with levels reaching as high as 29 per cent of the population in the UAE (Salem and Mourtada 2011: 9). Similar results were reported for Twitter usage, with Qatar at the highest with nearly 8 per cent of the population using it (Salem and Mourtada 2011: 18). A year later, the dramatic increase in use and influence of social media was continuing. The number of Facebook users in the Arab world grew by 50 per cent between June 2011 and June 2012, and tripled between 2010 and 2012 (Salem and Mourtada 2012: 7). Twitter usage also grew, prompted in part by Twitter's adoption of an Arabic interface. Kuwait witnessed the highest percentage of population using Twitter, at nearly 13 per cent (Salem and Mourtada 2012: 16).

Certainly a great deal of this usage is devoted to socializing, making friends, and keeping in touch with friends, acquaintances and colleagues. However, intellectuals and others interested in political affairs (domestic, regional and international) have taken to the use of social media with a vengeance. One of the best-known tweeters is Sultan Saud al-Qasimi of the UAE, who posts political criticism frequently in addition to regular editorials in a variety of media, and a recent study named him as the most connected tweeter in the Middle East. The same study also found that 78 per cent of the top fifty Middle East tweeters used the medium to discuss politics as well as sharing news, and that political and government officials are increasingly using Twitter (http://notebook.portland-communications.com/2012/11/how-the-middle-east-tweets-en).

Not surprisingly, social media are dangerous to governments because they are extremely difficult to control and they diffuse so rapidly and broadly throughout the politically active community. As a consequence, governments up and down the Gulf have acted strongly to arrest and jail those seen as threats on multiple occasions. While most of these arrests have had a political nature, other bloggers and tweeters have been arrested on charges of insulting Islam. But this may have a political twist to it as well: one Shiʿi was arrested in Bahrain on the

---

[6] For the purpose of this paper, relevant forms of social media include websites, listservs, YouTube, Facebook,

accusation of slandering the Prophet Muhammad's wife in a forum in retaliation for Sunni attacks on Shiʿah, while a Saudi tweeted what were regarded as blasphemous remarks against the Prophet Muhammad – the Saudi fled the country but was extradited from Malaysia and detained amid calls for his execution. A Kuwaiti received a 10-year jail sentence for insulting the Prophet Muhammad and criticizing the rulers of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

Even Kuwait has resorted to legal charges for challenges expressed on social media: a Kuwait University professor was detained on charges of using a Twitter account to slander the amir while a distant member of the ruling family and tweeter was arrested for expressing offensive political views. Since 2006, Oman has cracked down on bloggers and individuals posting comments on Internet forums such as the widely read Sebla, which for years has received a plethora of comments critical of the government. Six people were convicted in September 2012 of slander and of violation of the 'information technology' law, and were sentenced to jail terms of one and a half years as well as assessed fines of 1,000 Omani riyals. In the same month, the utility of social media was demonstrated once again when calls for a demonstration against the US embassy because of a US-produced anti-Islam film were circulated by mobile phone applications. Bloggers have been among those arrested and convicted in the UAE.

Discussion and the exchange of views via social media have provided an advantage over physical demonstrations, both in terms of the difficulties in arranging such forbidden displays and in maintaining anonymity for participants. As one Islamist arrested in the UAE expressed it, Twitter is the UAE's Tahrir Square (*Financial Times*, 18 June 2012). Electronic debates between pro-government and opposition supporters have emerged in all the states and new political groupings have developed online. Outspoken Dubai police chief Dahi Khalfan is an inveterate tweeter, as are many religious figures: one Saudi Islamic scholar has amassed more than 1.8 million followers (*Financial Times*, 18 June 2012).

Bahrain has displayed the heaviest reliance on the new media, including websites, for political purposes. In part, this has served as an avenue for disseminating information and opinion. The volume of tweets roughly doubled for the days around the 14 February 2011 demonstrations (Salem and Mourtada 2011: 19). The website of Bahrain Online, which offered a popular forum for discussing politics, was censored around the same time and its founder was detained.[7] But the instantaneous capabilities of Twitter and SMS have meant that

---

blogs, instant messaging, text messages (SMS) and Twitter.
[7] See the Bahrain extract from a CNN program on the social media during the Arab awakening at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zB2DeZBgTEk. The charge that CNN buried the program after showing it once is

marches and demonstrations can be organized on the fly and participants advised to gather in specified locations very quickly. This has been a hallmark in particular of the Bahrain situation and the 14 February Coalition (described below). One of the charges against activist Nabeel Rajab (of which he was later acquitted by an appeals court) was defaming the prime minister in a tweet.

6. FACTIONALISM WITHIN RULING FAMILIES AND DIFFERING VIEWS ON DEMOCRATIZATION

The future of political participation, whether formal or informal, in the Gulf may well be advanced – or impeded – by factionalism within ruling families. The question of the 'king's dilemma' arises in this respect, complicated by a necessary expansion into the 'king and ruling family's dilemma'. It has been postulated for decades in at least some of the Gulf states that prominent ruling family members have held variant views on the political future of monarchy and its role in their states. This can be roughly expressed as liberals vs. hardliners. That is, liberals are defined as those who believe in a loosening of power, expansion of participatory institutions, and devolution of authority from ruling families to the people. Hardliners are those who resist any change for fear of undermining the basis of monarchical rule.

The classic example is that of the Free Princes in Saudi Arabia who fled the kingdom during the reign of King Saʿud (r. 1953–64). They returned to Saudi Arabia a few years later but even today, one of them, Talal b. ʿAbd al-ʿAziz (a half-brother of King ʿAbdullah), continues to speak out on political and social issues. A comparable example is that of Tariq b. Taymur Al Saʿid in Oman, who left the country in opposition to his half-brother, Sultan Saʿid b. Taymur (r. 1932–70). Tariq organized other political exiles, proclaimed his intention to overthrow his brother and even distributed a constitution that he wished to institute. When Sultan Saʿid was overthrown by his son Qabus in 1970, Tariq returned to Muscat as prime minister, but fell out with his nephew less than two years later and never again played a prominent role in government.

In the early days of the events in Bahrain in 2011, it was widely held that Crown Prince Salman b. Hamad was arguing within family councils that greater accommodation should be reached with the opposition, while his great-uncle and prime minister for more than forty years, Shaykh Khalifah b. Salman, continued to resist fiercely any change – regarding it as capitulation – as he had in the past. King Hamad b. ʿIsa was seen as being in the middle. At the time of writing, however, it must be concluded that if a liberal wing of the Al Khalifah

---

exists, it has had little or no influence on government policy.

It can also be speculated that generational change within ruling families will bring an increased spirit of accommodation to changing realities. Younger members of families are seen as more educated, more cosmopolitan and more aware of political change around the world. But there are at least two contradictory conclusions that carry weight. First, these younger members have grown up in a world of privilege and it is unlikely that many would jeopardize the benefits they enjoy in the absence of overwhelming pressure; indeed, the opposite is more likely to occur. Second, in a variation of Acton's dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, responsibility and power are more likely than not to change liberal attitudes. Those family members who express reformist sympathies in their youth may well revert to conservative defensive attitudes as they increase their stakes in the system.

A universal approach in the Gulf to political criticism and dissidence has been co-optation, and the recent history of the region is littered with names of prominent officials and merchants who were outspoken critics in their youth. This process may extend to ruling families as well as the rest of society. It is sometimes held that a generational change in Saudi leadership, away from the sons of King ʿAbd al-ʿAziz to his grandsons or even great-grandsons, may produce a more liberal, reformist approach to governing. But would the succession of Prince Turki al-Faysal, for example, to Prince Nayif b. ʿAbd al-ʿAziz or Prince Salman b. ʿAbd al-ʿAziz result in a truly significant change of direction?

There is also the view that a modernizing monarch need not be a liberal one, that is, that the two notions do not necessarily go hand in hand. For example, Shaykh Muhammad b. Rashid Al Maktum, the ruler of Dubai, has embraced a radical approach to the transformation of Dubai from an Arab regional entrepôt to a truly cosmopolitan and hugely ambitious global city. There is no political liberalism in his vision. In fact, only Sultan Qabus in Oman rules more single-handedly that Shaykh Muhammad, who defers little even to his brothers and restricts participation (in the sense of advice and counsel as well as execution) to a very small circle of lieutenants. Where Sultan Qabus has made slow and cautious moves towards formal participation, Shaykh Muhammad has not. Furthermore, he seems to have little regular contact with any of his citizens outside his inner circle.

There are only two states in which generational and factional change has had any impact on political participation. Shaykh Hamad b. Khalifah's coup in Qatar ushered in an era of apparent liberalization of government as well as an ambitious and controversial foreign policy. Still, while Qatar has definitely modernized, Shaykh Hamad remains in full control and even

his promise for an elected parliament remains unfulfilled. In Kuwait, there has been some cautious optimism about a younger generation of Al Sabah replacing the sclerotic elders. The foreign minister and later deputy prime minister, Dr Muhammad al-Salim Al Sabah, was regarded as a good illustration of a younger, educated (Harvard PhD), capable member who could be groomed for leadership. But his political career seemed sidelined when he resigned in 2011 under fire from National Assembly members for alleged involvement in corruption. In the end, internecine battles within the family seem to be related more to personal disputes and struggles for power than to debates over the pace and extent of political change.

7. THE 'SOCIAL CONTRACT' AND THE ARAB REVOLUTION

Notions of the absence of effective popular participation in Arab politics were turned on their head during the spring of 2011. As some commentators have pointed out, reference to these events as the 'Arab Spring' tends to belittle their importance. Rather than a brief success against tyranny such as took place in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, the collective spirit of activism and the claiming of rights have taken on the air of revolution. Nevertheless, apart from Bahrain and to a lesser extent Oman, the 2011 Arab uprising has scarcely touched the Gulf states, at least on the surface. One assessment holds that 'The gusty winds of Arab Spring impacted the political and ruling elites in the GCC states more than it impacted the Gulf people and masses' (AlShayji 2012).[8] But it could well be that a deeper transformation of attitudes towards the legitimacy of monarchical and paternalistic leadership is taking place beneath the relatively placid surface of Gulf society.

The relationship between ruler and ruled in the Gulf heretofore can be described in terms of a 'social contract'. That is, paternalistic regimes promise prosperity, order and a freedom to pursue a socially and economically satisfying life, in exchange for the acceptance of full state control of politics. The state assumes the mantle of responsibility for guiding and supervising society while the citizenry eschews political participation. Within this framework, the occasional dissenting refrain has been for reform of the system, to make it work as it is morally (and traditionally) obligated. The governing role of the ruler and his family is accepted in principle, but the ruling family is expected to adhere to the social contract. When it does not, the bolder of the people express their demands for a fairer, more transparent system that embraces more economic equity and less corruption. When governments feel

---

[8] Al Shayji (2012) also contends: 'On the other hand, the Arab Spring has emboldened the Gulf masses and raised the bar of political demands and reforms within those states.' Nevertheless, he concludes 'It has pushed the GCC leadership to play the leading role in the Arab world. That is a clear indication of the resilience of these regimes and a sign that the GCC's moment in history as the new leader in the region and the Arab world has arrived.'

themselves pressed by these demands, they may enact modest changes that promise slightly more participation – but these are always clearly presented as 'gifts' of the regime, not an acknowledgement of the rights of the people.

Much has been made of the decisions in Saudi Arabia and Oman to provide greater economic benefits to their citizenry, a tactic derided by Western media as 'buying off' dissent. But in fact this may simply reflect a time-tested mechanism of feedback and response. The Gulf states, while autocratic and paternalistic, have exhibited a parallel tradition of listening to their people. When they do not, acceptable expressions of criticism may escalate into more visible discontent. This seems to have been the case in Oman. The country is relatively poor compared to the rest of the GCC and its elites have displayed an all-too-familiar pattern of using their status and positions to amass wealth. Still, the chorus of dissent that erupted in the spring of 2011 and continued through much of the summer seemed to focus on restoration of the social contract, demanding reform but not revolution.

On the other hand, Bahrain provides a potential example of the severe fraying, if not dissolution, of the Gulf social contract. The reaction of the Al Khalifah to expressed opposition in 2011 was extreme and focused on repression rather than reform or dialogue. The security situation reverted to the atmosphere of the 1990s uprising. Indeed, it was even worse, with arrests of doctors and nurses and indiscriminate attacks, both verbal and physical, on extensive numbers of Shi‹ah, even those who had cooperated with the government. The regime resorted to demonizing opponents, engaging in naked intimidation through an expatriate-heavy security apparatus, and actively seeking to delegitimize its majority Shi‹ah population, as expressed through extensive arrests and the destruction of numerous Shi‹ah mosques. Twenty activists were convicted of seeking to overthrow the state and sentenced to jail terms of various lengths, eight of them life imprisonment.

One of the negative effects of the events of 2011 was the polarization of many Sunnis and Shi‹ah into opposing and often hostile camps. In part, this seemed to be a deliberate regime strategy to mobilize Sunni support against the Shi‹ah opposition by inculcating the fear that the Shi‹ah wanted to replace the monarchy with a republic with Iranian help. A government-inspired Sunni Gathering movement emerged.[9]

The idea of a monolithic regime, however, should be treated with some caution. Indeed, many Bahraini observers contend that the ruling Al Khalifah have split into opposing camps.

---

[9] This and the following paragraphs are based on various news reporting and on discussions in Bahrain in February 2012.

The heir apparent, Salman b. Hamad, is regarded as the member of the family most willing to seek dialogue and thus resolution, as shown by his announcement on 13 March 2011 about a willingness to discuss parliamentary reform, naturalization, corruption and sectarian issues. This initiative was rendered moot when GCC Peninsula Shield (but mainly Saudi) troops crossed into Bahrain the following day.

The hardline faction of the family is headed by Shaykh Khalifah b. Salman, the prime minister, who seemed to be virtually on the point of retirement, with his nephew King Hamad b. ʿIsa in the ascendancy, before February 2011. It is possible that Shaykh Khalifah saw an opportunity in the emerging unrest to regain his position vis-à-vis the king and coordinated the Peninsula Shield movement with Riyadh, as well as forming a new alliance with fellow hardliners Shaykh Khalid b. Ahmad (the minister of the royal court) and Shaykh Khalifah b. Ahmad (the minister of defence), and gaining operational control over the Bahrain Defence Force (previously the preserve of the king and the heir apparent).

The sustained impasse well into 2012 between government and opposition, with its weekly if not daily diet of violence and arrests, brings a danger of polarization in opposition ranks in addition to the deep cleavages in Bahraini society. The most powerful opposition society, al-Wifaq, along with its ally Waʿd, reversed its original position about boycotting the first elections to the Majlis al-Nawwab (Chamber of Deputies) in 2002 and participated in the elections of 2006 and 2010. This prompted hardliners within al-Wifaq to form their own party, al-Haq, which continued to boycott elections on the grounds that fighting elections to a non-representative parliament only validated the regime's refusal to share power. After the 2011 unrest began, Hasan Mushaymaʿ, the most prominent leader of al-Haq, and other allied figures were arrested and sentenced to prison terms on charges of plotting to overthrow the regime.

But the spectre of an even deeper split still threatens. While al-Wifaq and Waʿd publicly remain open to dialogue with the government, the activism in the streets and Shiʿah villages is orchestrated in large part by the 14 February Coalition. The protests in the villages and attempts to occupy key locations, including the iconic Pearl Roundabout, are carried out mainly by young activists, teenagers or in their early twenties. Behind them exists a secretive collective organization that prioritizes targets and orchestrates flash mobs through Twitter messages. The existence of any central committee that may control the coalition remains secret, even to the mainstream opposition. It is this coalition that rejects compromise and demands the removal of the Al Khalifah. Furthermore, it is this coalition that threatens to

garner increasing loyalty as the government refuses to back down.[10]

There has always been a very small number of Bahrainis who have advocated the replacement of the regime by a republic. But the events of 2011 saw this minority view transformed into a rallying cry of a growing number of Bahrainis. After this development, what makes Bahrain different from, for example, Syria? Admittedly, the violence in Bahrain has not reached Syrian levels and the Al Khalifah have not been as ruthless as the Bashshar al-Asad regime. But fundamentally the reaction has been virtually the same: repression, intimidation, mass arrests, destruction of property and torture. In essence, they are both hereditary suppressive states.

The effects of the Arab unrest of 2011 could be seen elsewhere in the GCC. In Kuwait, the *bidun*, the Arab tribal population denied citizenship, evinced growing activism in the belief that the *hadar* (urban citizens) have marginalized them. In their struggle for recognition, they have struck alliances with the *badu* (Bedouin citizens) because they come from the same tribes and citizenship for the *bidun* would give the *badu* greater influence in the emirate. The *badu* already enjoy a majority of the seats in the National Assembly and they are becoming increasingly Islamist and in opposition to the government.[11]

The UAE government has engaged in a series of arrests of mostly Islamist citizens, with particular emphasis on members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The first wave occurred in April 2011 when a group that became known as the UAE Five was arrested for signing an Internet petition calling for constitutional changes and free elections. They were convicted in November of insulting the country's leadership and endangering national security, then almost immediately pardoned. The numbers in custody reached as many as fifty by mid-2012. Seven naturalized citizens among those arrested were stripped of their citizenship in December 2011; at least one was deported – to Thailand, where he had never been before. Another round took place in September 2012 with eight new arrests and the forcible move of Shaykh Sultan al-Qasimi, a member of the Ra's al-Khaymah ruling family, and another Islamist from house arrest in Ra's al-Khaymah to confinement in Abu Dhabi.

The Arab unrest directly inspired protests in Oman, complete with an occupation of

---

[10] Jones and al-Shehabi (2012) assert that 'The Coalition operates more as a collective than a traditional organization. It relies on a broad base of supporters who first generate ideas for dissent or particular kinds of activism in various digital forums. Once they achieve consensus, members turn to grassroots campaigning. In almost every protest today, banners bearing revolutionary slogans are also adorned with the small logo of the "Coalition." Its inclusion is not just a symbol of affiliation, but it is also a signal of the power of decentralization and community, and is representative of the new kind of mass politics that has swept the region more generally.'
[11] Interviews in the Gulf, February 2012. See also the assessment of Kuwaiti electoral politics by Ghanim Alnajjar on the Carnegie Endowment website on 8 March 2012.

Suhar's Globe Roundabout, inspired by Tahrir Square in Cairo. The demonstrations in various parts of the country were generated principally by economic grievances but also contained a political emphasis. Like Bahrain, Oman is one of the poorer cousins of the GCC and burgeoning unemployment has afflicted ever-growing numbers of secondary school graduates. Sultan Qabus b. Saʿid addressed the demonstrators' complaints by announcing the creation of 50,000 jobs as well as improving welfare benefits and raising government salaries and pensions. In addition, publicly voiced complaints against corruption in high places prompted the sultan to dismiss a number of government officials and a third of his cabinet, including the ministers of the Sultan's Office, the Royal Court, National Economy, and Commerce and Industry, as well as the inspector-general of the Royal Oman Police. A further pledge to increase the powers of the Majlis al-Shura and its sister institution, the Majlis al-Dawlah, had not been disclosed or implemented by mid-2012. All this dampened demonstrations but did not put an end to them.[12]

In recent years, Oman has acted harshly against political activists and those critical of the government. As early as 2005, two activists were sentenced to prison terms for protesting the government's harsh treatment of demonstrators against the arrests of a group of alleged Ibadi Islamists. One of these, Tayyibah al-Maʿwuli, had been a member of the Majlis al-Shura and one of the charges against her was using a mobile phone and the Internet to insult government officials.

In following years, more action was taken against users of social media and organizers of the Internet forum Sebla. Patience with demonstrators in 2011 was short-lived as the Globe Roundabout in Suhar, which had been occupied by protesters for a month, was stormed by the army and some of its occupiers arrested. Two protesters died, apparently from rubber bullets fired by the police. These measures were not enough to silence protests, however. These continued to take place throughout the country and were combined with strikes against major economic concerns such as the oil company in Muscat and one of the country's principal industrial estates just outside the capital, while a protesters' camp was maintained outside the Majlis al-Shura. Government action in disrupting demonstrations and encampments outside government buildings was followed by arrests of human rights activists. Around a hundred demonstrators and activists were sentenced to jail terms in the second half of 2011 and more arrests followed in 2012. Another wave of convictions took place in August and September 2012.

---

[12] Most of these paragraphs are summarized from Peterson (2011).

Effects elsewhere were more muted. While most of Saudi Arabia remained quiet, intimidated by a strong security presence, disturbances in the Shi‹ah areas of the Eastern Province picked up amidst allegations of heavy government repression.[13] However, another six were held in detention indefinitely on charges that they had planned to take part in a 'Day of Rage' protest on 11 March 2011, inspired by the events in Tunisia and Egypt. The UAE saw the arrests of bloggers and other activists discussed above. Only Qatar seemed immune to any visible signs of agitation.

This development is new, mostly, to the Gulf states. Certainly governments have engaged in intimidation and arrests in the past and present. The wave of arrests in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s in an atmosphere of coup attempts and the detention of bloggers and Islamists in the UAE since the early 2000s come to mind. Still, it is clear that the events of 2011 and 2012 have changed the perceptions of many citizens about the roles of ruling families. As one Gulf intellectual summarized it, ruling families are almost totally without comprehension of the way things should be handled and how things are done in the modern age. They try to marginalize or dissemble traditional institutions, such as the *majlis*, the use of which has declined markedly. The families think in terms of the way things used to work and privileges. They have educated generations of PhDs, engineers and other professions, and somehow do not seem to realize what these educated members of their societies have learned or experienced beyond their studies and disciplines (interview in Kuwait, April 2012).

Has the Arab Revolution of 2011 and the deterioration of ruler–ruled relations in Bahrain put the implicit social contract in the Gulf monarchies on the table for debate? Have the events of 2011 and 2012 provoked regimes into contemplating the necessity of increased participation or have they created a belligerent backlash?[14] Is the Saudi response to unrest in Bahrain – that is, the sending of troops to Bahrain under the guise of the Peninsula Shield – a

---

[13] Prominent Saudi critic Madawi Al-Rasheed (2012) remarked that 'Saudi Arabia's experience of the Arab Spring demonstrates that it lacks the structural conditions for mobilization, organization, and protest, let alone revolution. The economic and social deprivation, political oppression, and corruption that triggered revolutions elsewhere are all present in Saudi Arabia, but these alone are not sufficient to precipitate an uprising.' Her conclusion is sobering: 'If the delayed Arab Spring eventually reaches Saudi Arabia, it will likely be a bloody affair. Violent opposition is nothing new in Saudi Arabia, where jihadis have fought the state since 2003, and regime opponents took up arms in 1927, 1965, and 1979. In the absence of a tradition of peaceful protest and in the face of religiously sanctioned bans on even nonviolent activism, aggression against the regime and its enablers may again become the only option.'

[14] There is also the contention that the effect of 2011 events has caused some Gulf citizens to withdraw, figuratively speaking, to the safety of the bosom of their home-grown regimes. For example, a poll in Qatar indicated that 'The proportion of survey respondents who report being "interested" or "very interested" in politics decreased by almost 20 percent over [the first half of 2011], while the proportion of Qataris who say that living in a democratic country is "very important" to them dropped from 74 percent to 65 percent, a relative decrease of 12 percent' (Gengler 2011).

special case because of especially close Saudi–Bahraini ties, or simply the clearest instance of GCC ruling families circling the wagons in defence?

The answers to these questions are likely to be visible in the near future – measured by the coming years and not decades. Successful responses will depend primarily on the willingness of ruling families to respond positively to growing demands for reform and participation. But it must be said that the record so far does not leave much ground for optimism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abdulla, A., 2010. *Contemporary Socio-Political Issues of the Arab Gulf Moment*. Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper No. 11. London: London School of Economics.

Akhbar al-Yawm, 2011. Reported in the *Peninsula* (Doha).

Alnajjar, G., 2012. Is Kuwait Out of the Impasse? Carnegie Endowment, *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 8 March.

AlShayji, A., 2012. Arab Spring Impacts Gulf Politics More Than Its People. *Gulf News*, 5 March.

Crystal, J., 1990. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gause, F. G., III, 2011. Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability. *Foreign Affairs*, 90 (4), pp. 81–90.

Gengler, J., 2011. Qatar's Ambivalent Democratization. Middle East Channel on Foreignpolicy.com, 1 November.

Hayat, al-, 2011. Reported in *Arab News* (Jiddah), 5 July 2011.

Hegghammer, T., 2008. Islamist Violence and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia. *International Affairs*, 84 (4), pp. 701–15.

Hegghammer, T., 2010. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hegghammer, T. and S. Lacroix, 2007. Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-`Utaybi Revisited. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39 (1), pp. 103–22.

Jones, T. C. and A. al-Shehabi, 2012. Bahrain's Revolutionaries. Middle East Channel on Foreignpolicy.com, 2 January.

Lacroix, S., 2004. Neither Islamist, nor Liberal: Saudi Arabia's Emerging 'Centrist' Trend. *Middle East Journal*, 58 (3), pp. 345–66.

Lacroix, S., 2005. Islamo-Liberal Politics in Saudi Arabia, in P. Aarts and G. Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*. London: Hurst, pp. 35–56.

Lacroix, S., 2011. *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lynch, M., 2011. Will the GCC Stay on Top? Middle East Channel on ForeignPolicy.com, 20 December.

Matthiesen, T., 2010. Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi`a Opposition Group. *Middle East Journal*, 64 (2), pp. 179–97.

Mughni, H. al-, 2001. *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender*. 2nd edn. London: Saqi Books.

Peterson, J. E., 1988. *The Arab Gulf States: Steps Toward Political Participation*. Washington Papers No. 131. New York: Praeger with the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Peterson, J. E., 2002. Bahrain's First Steps Towards Reform Under Amir Hamad. *Asian Affairs*, 33 (2), pp. 216–27.

Peterson, J. E., 2004. Bahrain: The 1994–1999 Uprising. *Arabian Peninsula Background Notes*, January, No. APBN-002, www.JEPeterson.net.

Peterson, J. E., 2006. *The Arab Gulf States: Further Steps Towards Political Participation*. Dubai: Gulf Research Center.

Peterson, J. E., 2009. Bahrain: Reform, Promise, and Reality, in J. Teitelbaum (ed.), *Political Liberalization in the Persian Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 157–85.

Peterson, J. E., 2011. The Year of Oman's Discontents. *Middle East in London* 8 (1), pp. 16–

17.

Rasheed, M. Al-, 2012. No Saudi Spring: Anatomy of a Failed Revolution. *Boston Review*, March–April, www.bostonreview.net/BR37.2/madawi_al-rasheed_arab_spring_saudi_arabia.php.

Ross, M. L., 2011. Will Oil Drown the Arab Spring? Democracy and the Resource Curse. *Foreign Affairs*, 90 (5), pp. 3–4.

Sager, A., 2005. Political Opposition in Saudi Arabia, in P. Aarts and G. Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*. London: Hurst, pp. 234–70.

Salem, F. and R. Mourtada, 2011. Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter. *Arab Social Media Report*, 1 (2), www. arabsocialmediareport.com.

Salem, F. and R. Mourtada, 2012. Social Media in the Arab World: Influencing Societal and Cultural Change? *Arab Social Media Report*, 2 (1), www. arabsocialmediareport.com.

Trofimov, Y., 2007. *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of Al Qaeda*. New York: Doubleday; London: Penguin.

Published Kuwait Programme research papers

Contemporary socio-political Issues of the Arab Gulf Moment
Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, Emirates University, UAE

Sovereign wealth funds in the Gulf – an assessment
Gawdat Bahgat, National Defense University, USA

Labour immigration and labour markets in the GCC countries: National patterns and trends
Martin Baldwin-Edwards, Panteion University, Athens

The Qatari Spring: Qatar's emerging role in peacemaking
Sultan Barakat, University of York

Gulf state assistance to conflict-affected environments
Sultan Barakat and Steven A Zyck, University of York

Kuwait and the Knowledge Economy
Ian Brinkley, Will Hutton and Philippe Schneider, Work Foundation and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Kuwait Programme, LSE

'One blood and one destiny'? Yemen's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council
Edward Burke, Centre for European Reform

Monarchy, migration and hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula
John Chalcraft, Department of Government, LSE

Gulf security: Changing internal and external dynamics
Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Kuwait Programme, LSE

Basra, southern Iraq and the Gulf: Challenges and connections
Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Kuwait Programme, LSE

Social stratification in the Gulf Cooperation Council states
Nora Colton, University of East London

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC states: Revolution to realpolitik?
Stephanie Cronin, University of Oxford and Nur Masalha, St Mary's University College

Persian Gulf – Pacific Asia linkages in the 21st century: A marriage of convenience?
Christopher Davidson, School of Government, Durham Univeristy

Anatomy of an oil-based welfare state: Rent distribution in Kuwait
Laura El-Katiri, Bassam Fattouh and Paul Segal, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies

Energy and sustainability policies in the GCC
Steffen Hertog, Durham University and Giacomo Luciani, Gulf Research Center, Geneva

Volatility, diversification and development in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries
Miklos Koren, Princeton University and Silvana Tenreyro, LSE

The state of e-services delivery in Kuwait: Opportunities and challenges
Hendrik Jan Kraetzschmar and Mustapha Lahlali, University of Leeds

Gender and participation in the Arab Gulf
Wanda Krause, Department of Politics & International Studies, SOAS

Challenges for research on resource-rich economies
Guy Michaels, Department of Economics, LSE

Nationalism in the Gulf states
Neil Partrick, Freelance Middle East consultant

The GCC: Gulf state integration or leadership cooperation?
Neil Partrick, Freelance Middle East consultant

The difficult development of parliamentary politics in the Gulf: Parliaments and the process of managed reform in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman
Greg Power, Global Partners and Associates

How to spend it: Resource wealth and the distribution of resource rents
Paul Segal, Oxford Institute of Energy Studies

Governing markets in the Gulf states
Mark Thatcher, Department of Government, LSE

Western policies towards sovereign wealth fund equity investments: A comparison of the UK, the EU and the US (policy brief)
Mark Thatcher, Department of Government, LSE

The development of Islamic finance in the GCC
Rodney Wilson, School of Government, Durham University

Forthcoming Kuwait Programme research papers

Unassailable Sultan and stranded King in Arabia: Bahrain and Oman on the edge of the Arab revolutions
Khalid Al-Azri, University of Oxford

Kuwait's political impasse and rent-seeking behaviour: A call for institutional reform
Fahad Al-Zumai, Gulf University for Science & Technology

The private sector and reform in the GCC
Steffen Hertog, Department of Government, LSE

Economic diversification in the GCC countries – past record and future trends
Martin Hvidt, University of Southern Denmark

Constructing a viable EU-GCC partnership
Christian Koch, Gulf Research Center, UAE

Secularism in an Islamic state: The case of Saudi Arabia
Stephane Lacroix, Sciences Po, France

Second generation non-nationals in Kuwait: Achievements, aspirations and plans
Nasra Shah, Kuwait University

Dr J.E. Peterson has been involved with Gulf history and politics for four decades in publishing, teaching, affiliation with leading research institutes, living and working in the region, and publishing a dozen books on Oman, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, political participation, and Gulf security. Recent publications include the books *Oman's Insurgencies and Historical Muscat*, and articles and chapters on Bahraini politics, recent developments in Oman and Yemen, post-oil scenarios for the Gulf, tribes and politics in Yemen, boundaries in the Gulf, and Baluch in the Gulf.