

***LIBERALISATION VS. DEMOCRATISATION IN THE GULF MONARCHIES:
BEYOND LIBERALISED AURTOCRACY?***

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Definite shifts occurring

- Kuwait – pushing the boundaries – possible deadlock?
- Bahrain – elections and competition – within limits
- Qatar – constitution, elections promised for 2007 (?)
- S. Arabia – municipal elections 2005; Chambers of commerce elections;
National Dialogue sessions (2003-);
increasing assertiveness of *Majlis al-Shura*, and talk of election
- Oman – universal suffrage (latest elections October 2007);
talk of expanding reach of *Majlis*
- UAE – least movement, but note 2005 announcement of expansion in
size & role of FNC, plus 2006 semi-elections

Reasons: a quick summary

Local

- Resources/demands equation
- Social change
 - Development: wealth & change
 - Middle classes, emerging bourgeoisie
 - Urbanisation, education/literacy, media
- Room for adaptation in wealthy monarchies / window of opportunity for
non-revolutionary change
- Elite decisions / calculations

Regional

- Pressures on legitimacy from regional crises
- Regional examples (fellow GCC, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen)

International

- Pressures
- Zeitgeist
- WTO & economic globalisation

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Insights from comparative democratisation studies

1. The relevant *domestic actors* include:
 - (a) regimes / factions within regimes
 - (b) social groups – incl. economic interest groups / classes
 - (c) political parties – formal or ‘virtual’
 - (d) individuals.

These act on the basis *both* of calculation of interest *and* ideational motivations.

2. *Domestic structural factors* include:
 - (a) nature of the political system and its levels and bases of legitimacy
 - (b) the political economy in question
 - (c) technology
 - (d) societal factors such as literacy, education & urbanisation
 - (e) the characteristics of civil society
 - (f) cultural factors
3. *External structures and actors*, including:
 - (a) the role of particular external actors
 - (b) the characteristics of the international political economy and the country’s place in it
 - (c) the ‘Zeitgeist’

- (2) and (3) are largely intertwined and impact on each other.

- Domestic actors (1) calculate their strategies and tactics within the context shaped by (2) and (3).

Dynamics & patterns

1. Liberalisation / democratisation tends to be driven by a combination of top-down responses and pre-emptive moves, and bottom-up pressures; in turn, these occur in an external environment that may hinder or help the process.
2. Regimes when liberalising do not usually intend to allow more than ‘decompression’ while retaining ultimate control, but may not be able to stop further development once the process has achieved a certain momentum and sufficient (and sufficiently organised) pressure is exerted by groups in society.
3. Real democratisation is *never a forgone conclusion* of such a process, but when it does emerge it tends to be after a *lengthy process* that can feature repeated *setbacks*. There is no reason, moreover, why its shape should be predetermined.

THE GCC

Nature of the state (with variations)

Post-traditional liberalising autocracies,

using neo-traditionalist strategies + rentierism

Controlled decompression, not democratisation (yet?)

Reform is dependent on decision by ruling group / leaders

Why Gulf monarchies? (after all, they are richer than most, rentier states)

Pressures

- Traditional mechanisms no longer sufficient e.g. Saudi, Abu Dhabi

- Socio-economic development more broadly:

Urbanisation

Literacy

Information & technology

Civil society

Middle class

- Rent over time has caused accumulation of resources in the hands of wider society, giving some groups some room for autonomous action

Bourgeoisie!

Strengths enabling manoeuvre and experiment

- Wealth makes liberalisation less threatening

- Wealth makes competition less fierce, allowing more consensual politics

- Small monarchies with a basic reservoir of legitimacy

Material resources

Historical / neotraditional legitimacy resources

Small polities

Change manageable

Networks cutting across political cleavages

Monarchies: can change without breaking

Pattern of accepting – and fostering – social pluralism (corporatism):

Political liberalisation is one further instance

Ruling families preside over, and use, this.

→ allows non-revolutionary change

Rulers' calculations

International pressures

(currently ? deligitimised by other Western policies)

Regional influences

Domestic calculations

ONLY 'decompression', 'liberalised autocracy,' not democracy?

How far can this go from here?

Differences (on descending scale of reform – but also different in nature)

- Kuwait (lively contestation, culture of debate, probably crossing threshold)
- Bahrain? (poorer; less homogenous; overlap of communal, economic & political cleavages and issues; but moved significantly within overall autocratic framework)
- Qatar (large window of opportunity, but possibly limited effect, limited challenges)
- Saudi (exception in terms of size; very conservative society, small liberal opposition; large challenges; divisions in royal family) ◀
- Oman (relatively poorer; patterns of increasingly free elections but little effect beyond this)
- UAE (huge resources; small national societies; strong ruling family networks into national society; question of expatriate labour)

Limitations today are very evident

- Ruling elites' intentions largely non-democratic
- System strengths listed above
- Blockages in bureaucracy / fiefdoms / interests
See Saudi Arabia's 'segmented clientelism'
- Religion?
- Position of middle classes?
- Other cultural factors?

HOWEVER:

Generic reasons for possible further reform

Comparisons elsewhere / at other times

Impossible to stop? (with reverses)

BUT: Exceptional resources? (Qatar, UAE)

Exceptional times (Zeitgeist, WTO) (Iraq, Palestine)?

BUT: Local cultural path-dependency?

Continuing change in societies (domestic/global influences)

- Growth / complexity / urbanisation
- Exposure to ideas
- The evidence shows that socio-economic development broadly defined (i.e. not just GDP!) is positively correlated both with greater levels of democracy directly and with a larger middle class (and hence indirectly with levels of democracy) – even if these causal links are neither universal nor all-explanatory.

BUT note that the compelling statistical evidence of these positive direct and indirect causal links does not make them deterministic: they are neither necessary nor sufficient explanations for democratization.

Some specific indications in the GCC

- Kuwait*: splits in ruling elite (19 signatures of democratic petition);
vocal/informed population; middle classes
Civil society activism!
- Bahrain*: beginning to test the limits of wholly controlled liberalisation /
remains very gradual. Typical regime retrenchment:
tenable? Splits within ruling family.
- Qatar*: constitution actually allows for Amiri wishes to be overruled. But
conflict unlikely: scope for gradual long-term evolution.
- Oman*: unlikely – but major imponderable: what after Qaboos?
Uncertainty within ruling elite
Even so, some voices are heard
- UAE*: unlikely – see Qatar, but less! But note labour standards being
adjusted in response to expat labour action and international
pressure.
- Saudi*: unlikely to move beyond liberalised autocracy for at least a
generation – but will get gradually expanded influence &
participation of expanded sections of society, certainly as
represented in an increasingly assertive *majlis al-shura*.

Even for these 4 slow movers, ultimately we'll see further opening up.

- *In Oman, UAE & Qatar* this is likely to be through gentle adjustments controlled for at least a generation by the royal family.
- For the UAE, also note the growing *de facto* non-political 'participation' of expatriate labour, affecting labour standards in the context of economic globalisation (pressure, norms).
- *In Saudi Arabia* the same is likely – although here failure to manage change might just bring less gentle forms of adjustment.

For *Kuwait & Bahrain*, though, things are likely to shift more swiftly, and much will depend on the skill and unity of the ruling families in managing the change. Immobility, here, is not an option – or at least not one that will ensure stability. And the return to full-scale repression that would be the only alternative, is not likely to be a sustainable choice (not least given he changed international climate).

Policy implications for the outside world: external pressure?

Problem of legitimacy of external initiatives

→ question of other Middle East policies !

1. Focus on small-scale, specific issues in HR-related practices
Police, courts, etc.
2. Encourage reformist initiatives under way
3. Encourage economic reform
4. EU: keep framework on good governance as this can become a point of reference for local actors
5. Encourage them to sign International Conventions etc
(e.g. UN Convention on Corruption)

Concluding observations:

DON'T EXPECT short-term effects beyond limited liberalisation

DON'T EXPECT linear evolution towards predictable end-state

LOCAL FORMS are much more likely, varying in type as well as extent.

'NON-POLITICAL' FORMS OF PARTICIPATION will make themselves felt in specific fields (and may in turn over time have a political effect of their own)