# Reform from above: the politics of participation in the oil monarchies

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Political change has been slow in coming to the Arabian Peninsula, and when it has come this has largely been a result of uncontrollable pressures and introduced from above—that is to say, by the rulers themselves. While the oil monarchies seem to be making concerted efforts to address administrative and political shortcomings in their countries in response to a combination of pressures, this is not to say that blanket change is being imposed on these societies by outside forces. The cautionary note that Robert Stookey struck in the early 1980s still stands: that the Arabian Peninsula,

> far from being a uniform, undifferentiated region, is one of considerable complexity, strewn with booby traps for the unwary outside policymaker. If there is Ariadne's thread leading through the labyrinth, it is the determination of these various countries to decide for themselves what is in their best interest, to set their own national goals, and to cooperate among themselves only when they perceive it in their interest to do so. Any program to impose external leadership must be undertaken with extreme caution.[1]

Stookey wrote these words at the height of the Reaganite drive to politicize international commerce and apply normative western standards as the correct yardstick by which to measure friend and foe. Reagan's 'corrective' policy was seen as both destabilizing and contentious. As Stookey had suggested, the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would resist adventurism and did not rush to adopt inappropriate economic, political or foreign policies during the tense periods after the 1979 Iranian revolution and the eight-year long Iran–Iraq war that followed, when Saudi Arabia's brand of 'quietist diplomacy' tended to prevail right up to the final stages of the conflict.

Quietist diplomacy in the oil monarchies was the strategy not just for foreign affairs, but also for coping with internal pressures. Often in the 1980s and 1990s struggles for reform were quietly suppressed, or were dismissed as irrelevant to the needs of society, with little excuse or explanation. Reformist agendas were

[1] Robert W. Stookey, ed., *The Arabian Peninsula: zone of ferment* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), pp. xxx–xxxi.

often said to be inappropriate, badly timed, or simply too ambitious or radical. But, for reasons which will become apparent below, reform is very much the new spirit of the GCC countries which make up the Middle East's oil monarchies. Indeed, barring any long-term negative fallout from the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States such as a war against Iraq, regime change becoming an established part of US strategic thinking towards the Middle East, and increased tensions in US–Saudi relations, one can afford to be somewhat more optimistic about the prospects of political reform in the Arabian Peninsula states today than at any time since the massive influx of oil income in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

My argument about the process of political reform in the GCC states is based first and foremost on an analysis of the political economy of these states. The intention is to show that in view of the grave economic difficulties and social tensions that confront them, the GCC rulers have had little choice but to consider the introduction of economic and political reforms.[2] But further to this, the impact of the changes in the international system in the closing days of 1989 must also be given some attention, as influential forces with a palpable effect on the internal affairs of these countries. While it is true that by the end of the Iran–Iraq war the region itself had begun to show serious signs of decay, with 'rent' from oil revenues as the oxygen of the GCC economies being cut to threatening levels, it was the sudden disruption of the bipolar Cold War international system which proved to be the biggest dislocating force for regional systems in general and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in particular. The MENA system was not shielded from these international developments. Indeed, up to that point all regional actors had customarily set their national and international clocks by the Cold War; now, virtually overnight, that point of reference had disappeared, and before an uncertain 'New World Order' was cast in 1991 most of the oil monarchies had to quickly adjust to the impact of a new 'democratic wave' from Europe.

By the end of 1989, therefore, most GCC leaders were already speaking of the need to consider introducing new social and political initiatives, albeit rather half-heartedly to begin with.[3] As justification for the reassessments of their political systems they often pointed to the appearance of some 'new realities'.[4] These of course included much-publicized open criticism from unexpected quarters at home. The impact that dramatic political developments in several GCC countries were having on their domestic environment should not be

[2] Some of the wider implications of this line of thought are explored in Hassan Hakimian and Ziba Moshaver, eds, *The state and global change: the political economy of transition in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Curzon Press, 2001).

[3] Jamal Al-Suwaidi, 'Arab and Western conceptions of democracy: evidence from a UAE opinion survey', in David Garnham and Mark Tessler, eds, *Democracy, war and peace in the Middle East* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 82–115; Fred Halliday, 'The Gulf War and its aftermath: first reflections', *International Affairs* 67: 2, April 1991, pp. 223–34.

[4] For a concise discussion of the relevant issues see Graham Fuller, 'Respecting regional realities', *Foreign Policy* 83, Summer 1991, pp. 39–46.

underestimated. As Hardy has argued, the range of reforms being raised from Muscat to Kuwait 'reinforced the sense that change was in the air, and that [rulers were] having to adjust, willing or unwillingly, to new realities'.[5] Another critical development in the 1990s took place at the level of national leadership. Not only were new personnel introduced at the highest levels of decision-making in several GCC states, but different outlooks and political priorities were also allowed, unusually, to flourish. Personnel changes at this high level also brought with them changes in priorities.[6] Third, the economic impact and political aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 had to be addressed. This event acted as a catalyst for the examination, and eventual introduction, of major reforms across the Arabian Peninsula. It was against these domestic-driven changes that the spray from the so-called democratic wave in eastern Europe splashed when it reached the shores of the Middle East in the early 1990s. Together, these forces came to leave a definite imprint on the oil monarchies of the Middle East, forcing them to widen their policy options.

Furthermore, the unique nature of government and political authority in these societies has meant that where the discussion of political reform was introduced, it was very quickly and firmly tied to wider issues which are best labelled as 'good governance' matters. The idea of governance carries certain connotations in this part of the world that do not apply anywhere else, for here the very nature of 'rulership' is caught up with and tied to governance issues. The countries of the Arabian Peninsula are a group of family-based fiefdoms which have over a long period of time evolved into independent states. Traditionally, therefore, the terms of reference for governance in the Gulf Arab monarchies have been determined by the ruling families themselves, in whose domain political power has tended to rest. Until recently, good governance had meant little more than a careful management of the affairs of state. Now, though, the process of widening participation has been caught up with a range of internationally recognized 'indicators' associated with 'good' governance, including transparency, accountability, absence of corruption and nepotism, and rational and fair policy-making, along with efficiency and responsiveness in the public sector, the presence of an independent judiciary which operates (and is seen to operate) without prejudice, privacy laws and freedom of information, flourishing civil society institutions, and a welfare-oriented economic system. Even a cursory look at the Middle East in general and the GCC states in particular will show that the region is still a long way from meeting these criteria in full.[7] But the picture is not a wholly gloomy one, and in many respects clear progress has already been made.

[5] Roger Hardy, *Arabia after the storm: internal stability of the Gulf Arab states* (London: RIIA, 1992), p. 14.

[6] J. E. Peterson, 'The nature of succession in the Gulf', *Middle East Journal* 55: 4, Autumn 2001, pp. 580–601.

[7] For reflections on the GCC legal framework, for instance, see Nathan J. Brown, *The rule of law in the Arab world: courts in Egypt and the Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

## The democratization debate with regard to the oil monarchies

Largely because of the social make-up of the Arabian Peninsula states, the debate about democratization, or for that matter political pluralism, had until recently been taking place within a fairly narrow band of hypotheses and testbeds.[8] Until recently, and before an avalanche of criticism since 11 September following revelations about the role of militant Islamists in several of the oil monarchies, one line of argument had been that as the traditional societies of the Arabian Peninsula tend to run to a different, but equally effective, political clock, demanding their conformity with western-style democracies is not only counter-productive but also unrewarding for analytical purposes.[9] On this view, relations between civil society and the state (between the people and their leaders) in these societies are so well regulated by the entrenched traditional modes of interaction between the rulers and the ruled that the introduction there of western-style competitive politics or of parliamentary-based voting systems with elections at regular intervals could do little if anything to improve the quality of political participation and access in these countries, or to add to the efficiency of the state or its governing regime.[10] More than 20 years after the start of the oil boom a senior Gulf Arab official can still claim that 'parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchies are western notions which do not necessarily apply to the Arab world in general, nor to tribal Gulf Arab societies in particular'.[11]

So when in the 1970s, President Carter realized a long-standing American ambition by launching a democratization crusade in the developing world, and when in the 1980s the Persian Gulf region was faced with a uniquely theocratic parliamentary experiment in Iran, the view was often repeated that democracy was an irrelevant concept in the social context of the Arabian Peninsula. It was even said that unmeasured introduction of democratic norms by 'western do-gooders' could cause more harm—in terms of bringing about political dislocation and serious disruption to these traditional allies of the West—than good. The predominant opinion was that, surrounded as it was by political uncertainty, this strategically prized part of the Middle East should not be subject to heavy-handed western interference; what is quite obviously unbroken should be left alone. Sympathizers of the oil monarchies argued that the bulk of the conservative Gulf Arab countries, having been only recently introduced to the international system—with weak demographic and institutional bases, and being still novices at the international political game—should be left alone to find their own models of political development; they should be allowed to

[8] For an extremely helpful short guide to the democratization debate in the developing world, see Robert L. Rotherstein, 'Democracy in the Third World: definitional dilemmas', in Garnham and Tessler, eds, *Democracy, War and peace in the Middle East*, pp. 65–81.

[9] For a typical argument see Fouad Al-Farsy, *Modernity and tradition: the Saudi equation* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1990).

[10] For an interesting discussion of such factors see William Quandt, *Saudi Arabia in the 1980s* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1981).

[11] Quoted in Robin Allen and James Drummond, 'Emir's claims for democracy have yet to be tested', *Financial Times Survey: Qatar*, 7 Nov. 2001, p. II.

refine their existing rubrics for political interaction and also encouraged to find their own platforms for public discourse. The consultative 'shura' system, in other words, was said to work, and to work well enough for it not to be supplanted or substituted by half-baked western-type systems of government built around an elected national assembly.[12]

Other schools of thought begged to differ, drawing a more critical picture of civil–state relations in the oil monarchies. Some within the radical school even spoke of the virtues of 'Arabia without sultans'.[13] Halliday stated with regard to Saudi Arabia that 'the state was founded on the most backward ideology: unity of religion and loyalty to one family, making Saudi Arabia the only state in the world that was titled as the property of a single dynasty'.[14] These criticisms were equally applied to the other pro-western Arabian Peninsula countries as well.

Pointing to the 'rentier' nature of these societies, those of a political economy persuasion invested in considerable analytical concepts to explain the endurance of patriarchal and authoritarian regimes in the Arabian Peninsula. The classic formulation of Gulf Arab rentierism is put forward by Giacomo Luciani, who states:

> A state that economically supports society and is the main source of private revenues through government expenditure, while in turn supported by revenue accruing from abroad, does not need to respond to society. On the contrary, a state that is supported by society, through taxes levied in one form or another, will in the final analysis be obliged to respond to societal pressure.[15]

The context is very clear; these oil monarchies are detached from their local socioeconomic realm by virtue of rent. They have acquired relative autonomy from society, which gives them the ability to pursue national goals without accountability. Chaudhry elegantly applies this thinking to Saudi Arabia, in an analysis which can be extended to cover the other oil monarchies. She proposes that the oil boom 'created new channels through which resources circulated within the bureaucracy, rendering extractive and regulatory agencies obsolete and reorienting bureaus toward distributive branches of government. Exogenous resources changed the institutional shape, organization, and capacities of the Saudi bureaucracy, severing earlier links between taxation and organizational change. The extractive and regulatory branches of the bureaucracy were replaced with dozens of distributive agencies that managed the economy through the deployment of oil revenues'.[16]

[12] See Azzam Tamimi, ed., *Power-sharing in Islam* (London: Liberty for the Muslim World Publications, 1993).

[13] This is the title of Fred Halliday's famous book, *Arabia without sultans* (London: Pelican, 1979), first published in 1974.

[14] Halliday, *Arabia without sultans*, p. 49.

[15] Giacomo Luciani, 'Resources, revenues, and authoritarianism in the Arab world: beyond the rentier state?', in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble, eds, *Political liberalization and democratization in the Arab world: theoretical perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 211.

[16] Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The price of wealth: economies and institutions in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 141.

Another strand to the rentierism debate focused on the corrosive impact of rent. Palmer and his colleagues argued, for instance, that rentier 'behavioral characteristics make it difficult for the rentier state to increase its productive capacity and to maximize the economic and political advantages at its disposal'.[17] Beblawi, one of the main theorists of rentierism, extended the argument to the political realm and stated that 'public goods and private favours have thus gone together in defining the role of the [rentier] state. With virtually no taxes, citizens are far less demanding in terms of political participation. The history of democracy owes its beginnings … to some fiscal association (no taxation without representation)'.[18] This feature, he said, is absent from the oil rentier states of the Persian Gulf. As recently as the mid-1990s Luciani was arguing most emphatically that the 'rentier nature of the state is a strong factor in discouraging democratization in all countries that have access to oil rent, and I would be surprised if any of the rentier states were to democratize'; but, he conceded, the 'presence of a fiscal crisis creates the expectation that a country may embark on a process of democratization'.[19] The crucial linkage, that between fiscal crisis and political reform in the oil monarchies, is of course the very realm which needs to be explored.

In the oil monarchies, where rapid modernization and economic development had clearly taken hold, social norms and relations seemed to have fallen behind the pace of economic change. The puzzle was why rapid economic development in these developing countries had not led to broader political reforms. Why had the all-pervading economic earthquake not sent shock waves through the political structures of these countries? The explanation focused strongly on the socioeconomic relationships which oil income had nurtured, and the ways in which oil had reinforced existing social structures and provided a buffer for the ruling families.[20]

The rise of the petrodollar economic system in the early 1970s prompted the application of complex arguments purporting to show that the massive influx of capital resulting from rapid increases in the price of exported oil had enabled the traditional elites of the Gulf Arab monarchies to 'buy off' their population, to distribute largesse and to depoliticize them, to the point of dulling their political instincts. This was made possible because the ruling families spared no expense in trying to satisfy their nationals' material needs without additional costs to the population—in other words, without taxing them for the privilege. The offerings included the provision of such expensive services as health care, education from nursery to university, subsidized housing, food, electricity, petroleum, and

[17] Monte Palmer, Ibrahim Fahad Alghofaily and Saud Mohammed Alnimier, 'The behavioral correlates of rentier economies: a case study of Saudi Arabia', in Stookey, ed., *The Arabian Peninsula*, p. 20.

[18] Hazem Beblawi, 'The rentier state in the Arab world', in Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds, *The rentier state* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 53.

[19] Giacomo Luciani, 'The oil rent, the fiscal crisis of the state and democratization', in Ghassan Salame, ed., *Democracy without democrats: the renewal of politics in the Muslim world* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994), p. 152.

[20] Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab state: politics and society in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995).

a wide range of other important services, a high-tech infrastructure, and subsidized consumer goods, as well, of course, as employment.

The way in which the states deployed their oil windfalls, the argument goes, not only cushioned them against political upheavals, not only made much of society dependent on the elites, not only allowed the elites to undertake a form of social engineering by creating state-reliant modern middle classes totally reliant on the states' largesse for their survival (let alone prosperity), but also led to the emergence of powerful state machineries and bureaucracies that orchestrated the states' development. Thus substantial oil-based income had brought a large degree of autonomy to the state and its masters, allowing the elites to concentrate on the economic development of their states and routinely ignore their populations' political aspirations—a disregard for which they did not pay a political price or suffer a popular backlash. This rentier bliss provided a sharp contrast to the political maelstrom of neighbouring Iran and Iraq. Towards the end of the 1970s, with Iran in the throes of anti-monarchical Islamic revolutionary turmoil, Arab proponents of the evolutionary path to change used the experience of their troubled neighbour to underline the successes of the Gulf model and the ability of its elites to manage socioeconomic change within the confines of their 'traditional' societies. Ironically, up to the mid-1970s it was Iran which had often been used as the textbook case of the model of modernization and development that the other Gulf states were urged to adopt. Iran was said to be making major strides towards a prescribed 'Great Civilization', to paraphrase the last reigning Pahlavi monarch, combining its traditional forms of rulership with wholesale development of every realm and aspect of its polity.

## Collective and cumulative effects of the 'new realities'

The 1990s brought new challenges and winds of change. First, there was the indisputable political mark left on the oil monarchies by the occupation of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein and the subsequent efforts to liberate it. Ten years after the shock delivered by Iran's Islamic revolution, the Iraqi president's bold move against his smaller neighbour deeply shocked the GCC elites and forced them to be less complacent about political disquiet at home. In addition to its direct and indirect economic costs to the GCC states, the crisis also created a new momentum for change at the popular level. The arrival of western troops in Saudi Arabia in 1990, for instance, galvanized both the conservative and the liberal forces in the kingdom. Their presence encouraged each group to apply pressure on the House of Saud and demand changes to the ways in which contact between the elite (and government) and the people was regulated. While the former group wanted an end to what they perceived to be westernization and an emphatic endorsement of the traditions of the kingdom, the latter demanded more openness in the political and social life of the country. Women getting behind the wheels of their family cars and defiantly driving their vehicles through the streets of the kingdom in the autumn of 1990

constituted perhaps the most telling symbol of what the liberal forces in Saudi Arabia were demanding: individual freedoms and the introduction of a wide range of new rights.

At the same time as the political fallout from the Kuwait crisis came the so-called 'fiscal crisis of the state' in the oil-based economies of the GCC. Having suffered from a long-term decline in crude oil prices from the middle of the 1980s, these states were already under great fiscal pressure when the bill for the liberation of Kuwait arrived on the desk of the richest Gulf Arab countries: it was in excess of $200 billion. Weak national finances combined with the heavy costs of dealing with the Iraqi invasion limited the ability of these states to fulfil their 'national contracts' and shield their populations from the costs of national development. With the 'cushion' becoming increasingly threadbare, the population began asking questions about the absence of political participation and public consultation in the affairs of the state. Citizens in such countries as Saudi Arabia became even more agitated when the state found little option in its fiscal difficulties but to pass on, through indirect taxation and a reduction in some subsidies, some of the costs of development to the population. In Kuwait itself, the population was more adamant than ever that from that point on it should be involved in the shaping of the country's future. The Kuwaiti public wanted the unconditional reinstatement of the national assembly. Similar signals for political change were emanating from the other GCC countries.

Third, there were the repercussions of the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Suddenly, and without warning, new forces of political reform were pushing outwards from eastern Europe, meeting and fostering the mood for change increasingly prevalent among Arab citizens across the region. The demonstration effect of the transformations sweeping across eastern Europe was unmistakable. Within months of the 'velvet revolutions' in eastern Europe, Arab masses, from the Maghreb to the Arabian Peninsula, were demanding an end to corruption and arbitrary rule and the introduction of open and transparent government in their own countries. The oil monarchies were not immune from these pressures, and as their activists demanded change, so their governments responded by accelerating the pace of their proposed reforms, which by the mid-1990s included constitutional as well as legislative ones. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, for example, introduced the country's new Basic Law and its 81 articles with the announcement that the kingdom's 60-man Majlis al-Shura (whose membership had grown to 90 by the end of the 1990s) would complement the regular 'open-door' councils held on a daily or weekly basis by members of the royal family and their cabinet colleagues.[21]

Fourth, with the patriarch gone and the war behind it, the revolutionary country next door had begun to engage in such open public debates and display such pluralistic features that it increasingly seemed to resemble a democracy more than the populist theocracy Khomeini had crafted. Far from exporting its

[21] John Bulloch, *Reforms of the Saudi Arabian constitution* (London: Gulf Centre for Strategic Studies, 1992).

Islamic revolution, Tehran was now increasingly leading by example in the arena of political reform. On the eve of the 1990s President Rafsanjani, who was elected to the presidency with a large popular mandate in 1989, pushed open many doors to reform. During his two terms in office Rafsanjani's efforts in improving Iran's relations with its neighbours, including its conservative Arab ones, were reciprocated. Indeed, the GCC states wanted and warmly welcomed a moderate Iran, advising their citizens that it was now time to turn a new leaf in their countries' relations with Iran. But when they advocated closer ties with their northern neighbour they had not banked on the wider regional impact of the 'Khatami factor' and the ensuing political whirlwind which was about to be unleashed in that country. Constitutionally barred from standing a third time, Rafsanjani gave way to a very different executive leader in 1997. The new popular president, Mohammed Khatami, who was also a cleric and a former member of Rafsanjani's cabinet, boldly began to broaden the arena of reform to include popular appraisal of the many sacred cows of the Islamic regime, and to encourage the population as a whole to break down the barriers to the establishment in Iran of a democratic and pluralist state—of the sort clearly recognizable as western in style, though maybe not entirely so in content. For the GCC states, better relations with neighbouring Iran were one thing; to find themselves vulnerable to the winds of change blowing from Tehran was quite another. As a Saudi colleague put it to me: 'Iran's revolution posed sort of a technical threat to our security that we managed to contain, but whether we will be able to deflect the power of Khatami's movement this side of the Gulf remains to be seen. It is hard to decide which is more dangerous and threatening, the export of its revolution or the power of Khatami's reforms'. It was not just the message of his movement which was falling on receptive ears in the GCC states, but also the manner in which he secured his victory in the May 1997 poll, with over 25 million people cheerfully and willingly giving him a mandate to govern.

Fifth, the GCC elites were becoming fully aware that the (slow) opening of the political system could not only extend the rulers' legitimacy but also reinforce the ruling families' leading position within society. This message was being reinforced by two very different sets of forces in the 1990s. On the one hand, the state was jolted into action by the need to respond to the very vocal opposition forces in countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which were making free use of the World Wide Web and the internet to publicize their cause and embarrass the governing elites. The state in these and other GCC countries had to reaffirm its position by responding to the criticisms tabled against it by these largely western-based opposition groups. The state's response at home, in virtually every case, was to combine strong-arm tactics with announcements about new economic and political reform initiatives.

By proactively engaging in initiatives that signalled the launch of serious and systematic reforms in the political arena, often announced by members of the ruling circles themselves, the state was showing its responsiveness and its

recognition of its responsibilities to the citizenry. As will be shown below, in the course of the 1990s in every GCC state the ruling family attempted to deepen its commitment to the broadening of the political base and the establishment or refinement of participatory and representative mechanisms of the state. In some instances the elite opted to reform the existing traditional ('authentic') modes of participation instead of creating new (so-called 'alien') representative structures; in others the elite set about introducing new structures and quite radical forms of participatory systems. The Saudis introduced the national Shura, while the emir of Bahrain opted for wholesale reforms around the concept of a new 'national charter'.

A further push factor in the case of some of the larger GCC states was the example being set by a united Yemen under the leadership of the traditionally conservative North, which, albeit tortuously, was introducing a wide range of political and social reforms aimed at preparing the country for a post-Cold War regional and international environment.

Finally, there was the unavoidable impact of 'globalization' and late twentieth-century communications systems. The presence of such new media as satellite television, the fax machine, the internet and the highly accessible cellular telephone made it easy to transmit different ideas and information to society through channels not directly controlled or guided by the state. The uncontainable influence of information technologies on civil–state relations was another factor pushing the GCC leaders towards considering opening up more of their political space to the public.

## Forms of political participation in the oil monarchies

As the pace of political change has continued to accelerate in the oil monarchies, so it is important to consider how the traditional rentier societies of the Arabian Peninsula have been responding to the internal, regional and international political challenges facing them.

### *Kuwait*

Sheikh Jaber al-Sabah had indicated even before the liberation of his country that Kuwait was entering a new era and that elections for its vibrant national assembly would be one of the priorities of his government. Elections for the assembly were held in 1992, 1996 and also in 1999. The 1999 elections resulted from a direct and dramatic stand-off between Kuwait's vocal and politically powerful national assembly and the government controlled by al-Sabah. The assembly's bold move in 1998 to challenge the interior minister for allowing the publication of material seen by its Islamists as contrary to Kuwaiti and Islamic cultural values caused a serious constitutional crisis in the country, in which the assembly was said to be testing the frontiers of its powers while the cabinet, chaired by Crown Prince Saad (the prime minister), was hanging on to its

powers and status.[22] While it was the assembly which forced the issue, it was the cabinet which found a way out of the crisis: it chose to resign en masse rather than have one of its members thrown into the lion's den. Sheikh Jaber had little option but to try to defuse the crisis by dissolving the parliament and immediately announcing elections for a new assembly.

Such tensions between the assembly and the government are now commonplace in Kuwait, with the population and the media actively participating in the debates generated by the political openness in the country. That the forces for change are finely balanced in Kuwait is evident from the groups that make up the political form of the current Parliament: its members are divided among the Islamists (who won 20 seats in the 1999 elections), the 'liberal' group, which won 16, and the pro-government (largely tribal-based) individuals who won the remaining 14 seats. In Kuwait's vibrant political arena, the new members of the groups will continue to attempt to extend their 'supervisory' role and challenge the government's monopoly on decision-making, as they did with their narrow rejection of the emir's decree to extend the vote to Kuwaiti women. Female participation, as part of Kuwait's modernization, was proposed by Sheikh Jaber in a decree at the time of the elections, but was rejected by a small margin by the 'third assembly' elected in 1999. The Kuwaiti government's decision in May 1999 to approve a draft law granting women full political rights for the first time provided more evidence that the process of modernization is not restricted simply to tinkering with procedures.[23]

In other areas too the National Assembly on the one hand and the government on the other, are locked in battle, with the surprising outcome that their debates actually lead to more changes, reforms, and sometimes more freedoms in Kuwait, for example, reform of the press laws, freedom of association and debate.

### *Qatar*

Qatar, a small country with some experience of participatory politics, has also introduced a number of sweeping changes. Indeed, the reform of the political system was one of the declared key objectives of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani when he deposed his father in 1995. Prior to this, despite the existence of a constitution (drafted in 1970) and an 'advisory council' to the emir, the country continued to be run by the emir and a small group of advisers and family members.[24] Despite the citizens' relative comfort and the emir's rather

[22] Ghanim Alnajjar, 'The challenges facing Kuwaiti democracy', *Middle East Journal* 54: 2, Spring 2000, pp. 242–58.

[23] The emir's decree would have enabled women to run for office, vote and be elected in the parliamentary and municipal elections scheduled for 2003. The decree has had a very mixed reception among the Islamist groups in Kuwait, most of which opposed the measure. See *The Economist*, 22–28 May 1999.

[24] Emir Khalifa expanded the membership of the advisory council from 20 to 30 members in 1975 and to 35 in 1988. He also extended its term from two to four years. For a review of earlier Qatari and Bahraini attempts to introduce constitutional government, see Emile A. Nakhleh, 'Political participation and the constitutional experiments in the Arab Gulf: Bahrain and Qatar', in Tim Niblock, ed., *Social and economic development in the Arab Gulf* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), pp. 161–76.

benevolent style of leadership, by 1992 sufficient pressure had been building up in society for a group of 50 prominent Qataris to petition the emir for the introduction of more freedoms. Their call was answered by the emir's son, Sheikh Hamad.

One of the first acts of the new emir was to end press censorship and to bring under control the country's main vehicle for repression, the ministry of information. Not surprisingly, then, Qatar soon announced its intention to hold the country's first open elections since its foundation as an independent state in 1971. Its first ever national poll in March 1999 was for the 29-member Central Municipal Council. Female candidates were also allowed to stand,[25] and six women did so, although none was elected on this occasion. This successful event provided the first opportunity for the Qatari people to participate in an election, and they did so with great enthusiasm – voter turnout was 80 per cent.[26] Qatar, already endowed with the outspoken and critical al-Jazeera satellite television network, was now opening a new chapter in its political life. This election was to be the first in a series of other national polls.

Although the al-Thanis of Qatar made the earlier moves in the reform process, it is likely that the experience of the neighbouring state, Bahrain (see below), may affect their strategy and encourage them to take bolder steps towards political participation and accountability. It is in this light that the announced plans for other types of elections become significant: one can envisage a situation in which a 'bandwagon' effect arises as the Gulf emirates emulate one another, each adopting some of the features of the others' participatory mechanisms. In Qatar, a 32-member commission has already begun investigating the mechanisms of introducing a parliamentary democracy and an elected chamber. The introduction of these changes will of course require a new constitution, and this is likely to contain the following features: an elected assembly, with some legislative power, to replace the existing Shura council; the grant to women of the vote and the right to stand in elections; a declaration of fundamental respect for human rights; and the grant of political rights to the country's non-native residents. In the social context of the Gulf oil monarchies, the leadership itself recognizes that these are indeed revolutionary changes being proposed.[27]

### *Oman*

In Oman, the national Shura council was established in 1991, alongside the Majlis al-Dawla (the State Council, which acts as an 'upper chamber'). This Shura council was given the power to review legislation regarding culture, education, and social and economic issues, as well as the government's development

[25] 'Democracy in Doha', *Gulf States Newsletter* 24: 607, 22 March 1999, p. 3.
[26] See Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'Is the Middle East democratizing?', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 26: 2, Nov. 1999, pp. 199–217.
[27] See e.g. the emir's opening remarks at the Qatar Conference on Democracy and Free Trade, 26–27 March 2002.

plans.[28] By the mid-1990s, a number of announcements and policy initiatives were making clear that the elite had accepted the principle of direct participation by the citizenry in the political life of the country. The Basic Law of the State, codifying state–civil relations, was introduced in 1996. This law laid down the constitutional structures of Oman and committed the sultan to the strengthening of the consultative system. Accordingly, in 1998 the sultan announced that the 2000 Shura council would be elected, albeit in a poll limited to one-quarter of the population aged above 21. This was a milestone, as the Shura members had never before been elected. Perhaps more importantly, it was also announced prior to the September poll that all future elections would be based on the principle of universal adult suffrage which would include women. It is intended that this measure will result in mass participation in national elections and more political activity across the country. Even in the 2000 elections, one could sense a high degree of institutionalization: the process was referred to as *intikhab* (election), not *tarsheeh wa ikhtiyar* (nominations and choice); 50 appeals were lodged with the election monitoring body, and all were closely investigated, of which two resulted in further action and the overturning of the result in the Duqum Wilyat.[29]

Interestingly, some 600 candidates contested the 2000 elections for the Shura, including several female candidates. Indeed, female participation was encouraged throughout the election process, which led to two women candidates being elected, out of 32 standing.[30] One of the two female members of the Shura, the 31-year-old businesswoman Lujaina Haider Darwish, was quick to the draw, using her new position and voice to challenge the limited role of the Shura, and was soon calling for more decision-making powers to be given to the majlis, including legislative powers and more powers of scrutiny.[31] The other female member, Raheela al-Riyami, was elected to the majlis's executive bureau, its highest executive body. The Shura council, through its five technical committees, is already increasingly finding itself engaged in detailed policy-related matters with ministers and the government administration in general. The Shura may already have begun its march towards becoming an elected parliament with legislative powers.

### *Bahrain*

In Bahrain, where some major changes were evident as early as the mid-1990s, a consultative council was established in 1993, with similar oversight and advisory

[28] Abdullah Juma Al-Haj, 'The politics of participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council states: the Omani consultative council', *Middle East Journal* 50: 4, Autumn 1996, pp. 559–71; *Sultanate of Oman Majlis A'Shura Structure and Main Organs (1997–2000 AD)* (Ruwi, Oman: Golden P. Press, 1999).

[29] Information supplied by Ahmed al-Mukhaini, Durham, Nov. 2001.

[30] The Majlis al-Dawla already has five female members, and there are four women deputy ministers as well. In the 2000 Shura elections 30 per cent of the 175,000-strong electorate was attributed to female voters. Oman's ambassador to the Netherlands is also female.

[31] 'Oman: elections carry forward a quiet experiment in Gulf democracy', *Gulf States Newsletter* 24: 645, 25 Sept. 2000, p. 7.

functions to its counterparts in Oman and Saudi Arabia. Although in terms of importance and national role the new council was a mere shadow of the directly elected, 30-member national assembly which was suspended in 1975, the emir used it as the launching pad for a much grander scheme of reforms which were put to the public in 2001. This move was all the more remarkable considering the political tensions in Bahrain in the 1990s, both at the leadership level and on the street. Violent protest against the ruling establishment and human rights abuses was mirrored in an internal power struggle between Crown Prince Hamad and his uncle, Sheikh Khalifa. The transfer of power to Sheikh Hamad took place in 1999 upon the death of Emir Issa.

Emir Hamad has not sat idly by since taking the reins of power. First came the 45-strong National Charter Committee (NCC), set up in late 2000, which acted as a technical successor to the 40-member Majlis al-Shura established by Emir Issa in 1996. Emir Hamad had already constituted a new, more representative majlis in September 2000, which included four women, 19 Shi'as, 19 Sunnis, one Jew and one Christian. The NCC, comprising a cross-section of Bahraini society, was asked to examine and approve the new 'National Charter', which was put to a referendum in February 2001. For all its initial objections to the emir's conduct and plans, the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement endorsed the emir's introduction of the charter, as did other opposition groups.

As if to underline his commitment to political reform and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in the country, the emir declared on the anniversary of the 2001 vote that his state would from February 2002 be known as the Kingdom of Bahrain. The 'establishment of constitutional institution', he said, 'fulfils the pledge of reforms that was overwhelmingly endorsed by the popular referendum on the "National Action Charter"'.[32] Constitutional changes also allow for equal participation for women in all local and national elections, and the establishment of a constitutional court and an independent audit bureau.

These developments in the small Persian Gulf island of Bahrain are remarkable for a number of reasons. First, the design of the charter, the debates around it, the nature of its introduction and the implementation of its recommendations mark the first successful top-down execution of wide-ranging political reforms in the GCC. In this case, the leader is himself the revolutionary agent, rather than the protector of the status quo and of so-called 'conservative values'. In this regard at least, the Bahraini experience defies the conventional wisdom about the role of Gulf leaders in their national politics.

[32] Quoted in Latheef Farook, 'Bahrain declared constitutional monarchy', *Gulf News*, 15 Feb. 2002. To reinforce the depth of the reforms, the emir (king) also announced the dates of the new elections in the new kingdom, bringing these forward to 9 May 2002 for municipal elections and 24 October 2002 for parliamentary elections (which had been scheduled for 2004). The May poll was the first such election to be held in Bahrain since 1957. The poll for the 40-seat parliament in October 2002 enjoyed a 53.2 per cent participation rate, with 177 candidates standing. Of this total 8 were women. That this was a genuinely popular poll is underlined by reports of one voter, the 70-year-old Fatima Abdul Aziz, explaining, 'I was asked by people to boycott [the elections], but I told them to get lost'. *Arab News*, 30 Oct. 2002.

*Reform from above*

Second, the charter itself is indeed a revolutionary document which the emir personally championed, against some stiff opposition from within the elite. The charter speaks of transparency, accountability, justice, equality between the sexes and among ethnic/religious groups, equal opportunity for all, respect for human rights, the establishment of an independent judiciary, and the introduction of a new two-chamber parliamentary system.[33] Nor was it just the content of the charter which created excitement, but also the institutionalization of the process of reform which the emir has introduced. In anticipation of general support for the charter, new structures were created soon after the February 2001 referendum so as to facilitate the smooth introduction of the reforms. Plans were put in place for local elections to take place in 2002 and parliamentary elections in 2004.[34]

Third, the manner in which the charter was received by the Bahraini people is quite encouraging. According to government data, 98.4 per cent of voters supported the reform package. The participation rate was 82 per cent.[35] There was no violence surrounding the poll—indeed, a carnival atmosphere prevailed—and the emir spoke of the referendum marking the first concrete step towards full democracy.

Finally, soon after the referendum, the emir underlined his commitment to reform by abolishing both the hated state security laws and the state security court, which had been used quite extensively to suppress all opposition. The court was replaced by a new committee, chaired by the liberal-minded crown prince, to oversee the introduction and implementation of the charter. Another new committee was also set up to carry through the necessary amendments to the constitution to clear the way for the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the sheikhdom.

*Saudi Arabia*

Even in Saudi Arabia, the country often seen as the most conservative of the GCC states, one feels the winds of change blowing—more strongly, indeed, with every executive lever that Crown Prince Abdullah acquires. Saudi debates over reform in the kingdom should be seen against the backdrop of rapid social change in the country, the dizzying pace of urbanization and an unprecedented expansion of the role of the government machinery, dominated by the al-Saud family, in running the country, which has evolved into what one might call a 'rentier-corporatist' state. While Saudi Arabia has undergone massive social change since the mid-1960s, the most dramatic political developments since the 1960 political challenge of the 'Liberal Princes' occurred after the outbreak of

[33] One elected lower chamber to tackle all legislative matters, and an appointed Shura council to fulfil a consultative role.

[34] As already noted, the parliamentary elections were brought forward to 2002 by the emir (see note 32 above.)

[35] According to the election monitoring committee, 217,579 individuals were given the vote, of whom 196,262 chose to participate in the ballot; 191,790 people supported the charter. www.ArabicNews.com (17 Feb. 2001).

the Kuwait crisis in 1990.[36] There was unexpected protest from the more liberal-minded Saudis about lack of freedoms in Saudi Arabia itself, but, as Gause notes, it was the religious-based protests which made the most direct impression on the elite.[37] In a short period after the onset of the crisis, prominent Saudi citizens, most of them motivated by religious convictions, began publicly to petition King Fahd to extend the realm of Shari'a law and also to introduce economic reforms. The first such appeal came in 1991, followed by a second petition in mid-1992. These were to be early signs of an emerging Islamist opposition to the al-Sauds, which eventually organized itself around the Committee to Defend Legitimate Rights (CDLR) and Bin Laden's armed 'jihad' movement.[38]

While attempting to contain the pressure from the liberals, the king took several measures to end the escalating armed insurgency by radical Islamist elements, and to bring into line the religious protesters, who had hitherto been one of the most important pillars of the regime and a loyal stratum of society. Announcements of a number of reforms accompanied the heavy hand of the state in suppressing the protests.[39] Thus, a royal decree in March 1992 announced the foundation of a 'Basic System of Government' and the creation of the kingdom's first modern national consultative body, the advisory Majlis al-Shura, which was inaugurated in August 1993. At the same time, two other measures were adopted: first, new administrative laws for the running of regional governments were passed, their provisions including the introduction of regional government and Shura councils; and, second, procedures and customs pertaining to the succession to the throne were codified into a set of regulations. These measures have been followed up by other changes. A new press and publication law introduced in spring 2001 guarantees freedom of expression ('within the framework of existing rules'), the printing of foreign newspapers in the kingdom, publication of newspapers by individuals or private interests, and 'constructive criticism', albeit within the state's narrowly and carefully defined boundaries. The new press law by itself may not have impressed many outside observers, but in the Saudi context it reinforces the message being sent to society that the state is becoming more tolerant of alternative views and welcomes wider discussion of issues affecting the kingdom.

These developments should be seen in a wider context as part and parcel of the elite's drive towards accountability and transparency. In a sign of the government's efforts to professionalize the civil service, for instance, the Bureau of Civil Service was upgraded to a ministry. The introduction of the press law was preceded by a cabinet reshuffle in 1999, an event which usually signals the

[36] Rahshe Aba Namay, 'Constitutional reform: a systemization of Saudi politics', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 16: 3, 1993, pp. 43–88.
[37] F. Gregory Gause III, 'The Gulf conundrum: economic change, population growth, and political stability in the GCC states', *Washington Quarterly* 20: 1, Winter 1997.
[38] Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and political dissent* (London: Macmillan, 1999).
[39] The proposals focused on the so-called 'three reforms', reform of the basic laws, the shura, and the regions: Nidham al-Asasi, Nidham al-Shura and Nidham al-Manatiq.

leadership's thinking on national issues. In the course of this reshuffle, the most recent event of its kind since the groundbreaking reshuffle of August 1995 (which itself was the first of its kind since the early 1970s), a number of new ministers joined the cabinet, several of whom had already served as members of the Shura. This point should be underlined, for such circulation of personalities is providing graphic illustration of the deepening links between the all-powerful Council of Ministers and the increasingly influential Shura council.

More overtly committed to the principles of Shari'a law than many of its neighbours, the Islamic-based Shura council is the cornerstone of the 1990s reforms in the kingdom and its membership and functions have slowly changed in the period since 1993. In the first place, the Shura's membership was increased by a third, from 60 to 90, between 1993 and 1997.[40] It now includes a broader cross-section of Saudi society and is better able to articulate its many interests and voices. Indeed, since 1995 (when its Committee of Petitions was established) the Shura has been able to receive petitions, complaints and even suggestions from the general public on how to improve the country and on how the Shura itself might be able to expand its facilities. Although its members are entirely selected by the monarch from a carefully scrutinized national list of potential candidates from the professions and the business community, the Shura increasingly takes its core role of advising, scrutinizing and criticizing extremely seriously. Its debates are vigorous and thorough, and its members pull no punches in their (increasingly accessible) debates with the executive branch or in their own internal deliberations. The speaker of the Shura carries considerable authority both within the chamber and also in the wider community.

Institutionally and procedurally the Shura has evolved quickly, increasingly resembling a complex organization. It is acquiring a life of its own, and being propelled by its own momentum into realms of political activity hitherto reserved for the royal court. As al-Saud explains, 'in practice, members of the [Shura] are allowed to initiate legislation and review domestic and foreign policies of the government'.[41] It routinely also issues resolutions and makes recommendations which have an obvious bearing on the work of the government.[42] My own first-hand experience of the Shura suggests that this is a stable, reform-oriented technocratic forum which, in a traditional and inherently conservative society such as Saudi Arabia, will serve as the ideal sounding-board for the testing of future reform plans, and possibly act as the ideal vehicle for their introduction as well. Its membership comprises a highly educated, confident and influential group of men, whose importance is reflected in their membership of the Shura—not the other way round. Furthermore, if architectural politics

[40] The 90-member Shura was inaugurated in July 1997. For an analysis of the social background of the Shura members and their role, see R. Hrair Dekmejian, 'Saudi Arabia's consultative council', *Middle East Journal* 52: 2, Spring 1998, pp. 204–18.

[41] Faisal bin Misha'al al-Saud, 'Political development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: an assessment of the Majlis Ash-Shura', PhD thesis, University of Durham, 2000, p. 175.

[42] Mohamed bin Abdullah al-Mihna, *Sejel Amel Majlis Ash-shura wa Injazetah Khalal Dourateh Awali, 1414–1418* (Review of the activities of the Majlis al-Shura during its first term, 1993–1997) (Riyadh: Majlis al-Shura Printing Office, 2000).

is taken into account, then the Shura building, with its generous proportions, support structures and lavish interior, signals two things to the curious visitor: first, that the Shura council is a welcome and permanent feature of political life in the kingdom; and second, that the Shura is an important national institution worthy of nurturing and developing. As its functions evolve and its four-yearly rotating membership slowly expands (there is talk of its membership rising to 120), one is left with the thought that Saudi Arabia is unlikely to be far behind its neighbours in experimenting with pluralization.[43] But things will be different here, as the self-avowed liberal Prince Talal has noted: 'the majority in Saudi Arabia … prefer gradual steps towards a democratic life. If the citizen can express an opinion and take part in decisions in one way or another, that is what is important … the structure of the Saudi system is different than [other countries]; there are customs [here] and customs are stronger than laws'.[44]

*United Arab Emirates*

In the United Arab Emirates, a 40-member National Federal Council was established soon after the creation of the state in 1971. The Council has played an active part in the evolution of the UAE as an integrated state, but it has never acted as a vehicle for the expansion of the political base of the country, remaining throughout its life a technical organization. It restarted its meetings in 1993, after a two-year break following the Kuwait crisis. Its membership today is more technocratic and youthful than in the past, but its numbers have not expanded, nor has its agenda changed in any substantial way. Little political activity is apparent at the federal level, with the exception of a few perceptible changes—a major cabinet reshuffle in 1997, for instance. However, at the micro-level, there is some evidence of reform taking root. In an unprecedented move in May 2001, for instance, five women were appointed as consultants to the ruler of Sharjah, Sheikh Sultan al-Qasimi. The women serve on the emirate's own consultative council, which was established in 1999.[45]

The big question for the UAE today is how smoothly the succession from Sheikh Zayed to his son (Sheikh Khalifa) will be handled, and how effective a ruler the latter will prove to be. Such big issues seem to overshadow all others relating to political reform. Uniquely among the GCC states, in the UAE political activity tends to take shape at the more local (emirate) level than at the national level, but the members of the federation are so closely tied to one another that there is little room for each to experiment with new political structures. For that reason, evidence of major changes is hard to come by, and, as noted above, where reform is introduced it still has a local character.

Having considered the nature, content, type and dynamics of political activity in the GCC states today, one must not lose sight of the diversity of developments

[43] Roula Khalaf, 'A wind of change must rise in Riyadh, says Prince Talal', *Financial Times*, 30 Jan. 2002.
[44] Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz, *Reuters*, 4 March 1998.
[45] www.ArabicNews.com, 10 May 2001.

in this part of the world. Richard Lawless's observation comes to mind: Gulf Arab societies may appear similar but they should not be treated as though they were a homogeneous entity. On closer acquaintance, he said, one is struck by their diversity.[46]

## Implications of the political reform process

Looking back at the debates of the 1970s, it is quite astonishing how far these countries have travelled, and how far we have come in our understanding of the complex and subtle structures and relationships which make up the societies of the Arabian Peninsula. The suggestion made by Halliday in 1979 that 'the record of the past four years' [i.e. since the publication of his *Arabia without sultans*] had been, 'on balance, deficient' hardly holds true just two decades later. 'In the two Gulf countries that had some minimal, circumscribed forms of representative assembly, Kuwait and Bahrain,' he said, 'even these timid entities proved too much of a threat to the ruling families and they were dissolved'.[47] Yet today, Kuwait and Bahrain, along with Qatar, are in the vanguard of a new wave of reforms. It is also astonishing to see how far these states have come in terms of managing change, and the vast oil income which brought with it an array of economic and social reforms (as well as, latterly, political reforms) into their traditional societies. With new reforms under way and signs of renewed political dynamism in evidence across the Peninsula, it is perhaps appropriate to consider some of the medium- to long-term implications of the reform process on the GCC group of states—the model *par excellence* of family-based rule in the Arab world.

One strong conclusion emerging from the survey outlined above of the types of institutional political activity now prevalent is that the GCC states, far from being a stagnant political arena, are in fact characterized by a great deal of dynamism. What we can glean from the range of political activities in the oil monarchies is that most GCC leaders are now convinced of the virtues of widening participation. They are doing so at different rates and with different intensity, however. Some have opted for the radical overhaul model, introducing major reforms and clearing the way for the establishment of constitutional democratic monarchies, while others have been more cautious and have preferred a more gradualist approach, focusing instead on the opening up of political space within the bounds of the existing political system. Even within these two models one finds quite a range of options being explored by the Gulf rulers. In the case of the cautious states, for instance, one finds that Oman is evidently more keen to broaden participation to include women than to experiment with the introduction of new institutions. The sultan does not see the creation of new institutions as enhancing popular participation in setting priorities and determining policies. In Saudi Arabia by contrast, the elite seems

[46] R. I. Lawless, ed., *The Gulf in the early 20th century: foreign institutions and local responses* (Durham: Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1986), p. 1.
[47] Halliday, *Arabia without sultans*, pp. 521–2.

more committed to widening access through the expansion of the Shura system, while also creating a legal framework within which national debate can take shape. The introduction of the new press law, for instance, could be seen as providing some opportunities for widening participation in debates on issues of national or local importance. In the medium term, the establishment of independent press and publishing houses could represent the growth of independent institutions with a separate voice (and identity) from that of the state. If such a change were to occur it would mark a definite departure from the assumed practices of a rentier state, in which the state is said to be in control of all public spaces. The role that the independent press in Iran played in advancing the reform process during its early stages could also be instructive here.

Uniquely in the Muslim world, the GCC states have managed to keep some of their traditional political features while also adapting to the forces of modernization. In virtually every oil monarchy today, one can be invited to go to a 'diwan', the formal meeting place of the leading families, to participate in a hot debate, or walk into a majlis (open meeting) held by a senior member of the royal family, a government minister or both. In Saudi Arabia one can appear, unannounced, and personally petition the king and the crown prince twice a week; one can attend majlises of dozens of influential Saudi personalities on a daily basis, and petition governors almost as frequently.[48] Prince Salman has explained the importance of the open majlis system to the kingdom in the following way: 'Saudi people have become accustomed to the practice of the *Majlis*. The main aim here is to establish some sense of close relationship between leaders and the general public. Attending the *Majlis* has become a deep-rooted custom and a tradition which some people would not like to miss'.[49] Seen from the leadership's perspective, the majlis system provides a direct and tangible link between the rulers and ordinary citizens. This kind of instant access may not have the trappings of an institutionalized political structure, but by virtue of opening the door to every citizen with a problem or an opinion, it does allow a bond to grow between the rulers and the ruled. Again making comparison with Iran, it could be argued that this was the main missing ingredient in the Iranian elite's relations with the wider society, the breakdown of which eventually caused the demise of the Pahlavi monarchy.

Returning to the 'big picture', how might the plethora of reforms enumerated above affect political participation in the oil monarchies, as well as the relationship between the ruling elites and an emerging civil society? Considering that as recently as 1992 Kuwait was seen to be providing the oil monarchies'

[48] I had the pleasure of attending the mid-day majlis of Prince Salman (Governor of Riyadh) in Riyadh in Feb. 2001. This was a truly extraordinary experience, where one witnesses one of the most senior members of the al-Saud household personally receiving petitions from literally hundreds of people, young and old, Saudi national and foreign, who flock to his majlis. He receives every single person, sits and personally reads every petition handed to him, issues instructions, explores the more complex issues with the plaintiff, arranges for the petitions of women visitors (who wait elsewhere while their problem is being attended to) to be dealt with, and, well over an hour later, leaves to attend to affairs of state. On average, he does this twice a day!

[49] Quoted in al-Saud, 'Political development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', p. 146.

only model of a pluralist system, I would argue that we have indeed come a long way from the days in which these countries were famous for their political stagnation. The surprise today is not so much how the GCC states have changed—though, as we have seen, this is an interesting question in its own right—but how the other GCC states apart from Kuwait managed to stand still for so long and preserve their traditional modes of political interaction without exhibiting the outward signs of implosion. The answer, of course, is that resistance which could have caused implosion was definitely growing in more than one of the oil monarchies, but that in the end the regimes were able to contain these forces. Take Bahrain, for example, which was plunged into a mini-civil war in the 1990s when discontent with the style of the Khalifas' rule spilled on to the streets of Manama and other towns. The growing economic and political price of the rebellion was such that it prompted the ruler to change direction and opt for a pluralistic mode of governance. Bahrain also badly needed to create the stability that international financiers find attractive if it was to establish itself successfully as the new financial hub of the region.

In Saudi Arabia, too, the contours of an emerging armed rebellion, coupled with the damaging activities of such organizations as the CDLR, encouraged the leadership to be more proactive in introducing some reforms and in considering issues such as widening access. Although Saudi Arabia is still far from an implosion, nonetheless its leaders have preferred to engage with the issues rather than allow them to become open political wounds. One simple explanation of this new approach in the kingdom, then, is to be found in the regime's efforts to minimize the damaging impact of such vocal opponents as Osama bin Laden.

Defensive political responses aside, we must look for reasons in the economic realm as well. As noted above, one of the main factors driving a broader reform process in the oil monarchies has been the so-called 'fiscal crisis of the state'. One argument is that as the effectiveness of the allocative mechanisms of the GCC rentier states diminishes so they introduce economic reforms, which also increasingly seem to have a political dimension. The question then is, can rentier—and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, rentier-corporatist—structures be reformed sufficiently to allow for the development of the economy as well as the opening up of the political system? With reform-oriented activities in the GCC taking place at their current intensity, one can dare to be optimistic and give a cautious 'yes' as an answer, with the proviso that measures to widen participation go hand-in-hand with improvements in governance. Gause and others have noted that the decline in oil prices since the mid-1980s has forced the GCC governments to consider some unpalatable economic options (privatization, cuts in subsidies, introduction of taxes, abolition of free facilities, bureaucratic restructuring, etc.), which have had very significant political consequences for the governing elite and its relationship with a state-dependent society.[50] Such crises may have forced the pace of reform, but have not dictated

[50] Gause, 'The Gulf conundrum'.

its content, which has increasingly been set by the need to reform the socioeconomic relations of society. This need has not only been recognized by the elites, but has actually evolved from within the rentier structures of the oil monarchies themselves. As Gause notes:

> As the role of the state in these countries has grown, it has begun to call forth new demands for representative institutions and responsible government from society. Those demands spring from the very processes of state growth and expansion occasioned by the oil boom. The recent [1990s] upsurge in political activity in the Gulf monarchies is not only consistent with the realities of the rentier state and its relationship to society, but is in fact generated by those realities.[51]

In 1993, Norton was arguing that 'the time-honored remedies [of] co-opting critics, bribing recalcitrants with privileged access to power and deals, locking up dissenters' will no longer work in the Middle East region, because 'few rulers today have the pockets deep enough or jails large enough to cope with the problem in traditional ways'.[52] It has also been intimated that an inclusive policy, which 'would necessitate the introduction and implementation of reforms that open up outlets for the free expression of opinion, limit the arbitrary exercise of power and permit political association', may be the only way forward, but that such solutions might be too high a price to pay for some GCC rulers;[53] they might examine such reforms in the cold light of day and conclude that they are too destabilizing politically and therefore beyond the means of their (rentier) societies. Yet to the contrary, far from the reform process—which can hardly be regarded as slow, looked at in its entirety—being seen as destabilizing by the leaderships, it is the rulers themselves who are emerging as the very agents of political change, with the trend very much towards a broadening of the reforms. The era of containment seems to be firmly behind us; as a Bahraini colleague put it, the march of constitutionalism has already started. But as the process of reform is being guided 'from above', questions should be asked about the nature of the process and whether the reforms are of enough significance if they do not encompass reform of the sociocultural and political structures of the oil monarchies—the very pillars on which the elites lean for power and legitimacy.[54]

Furthermore, there is still no way of predicting the full repercussions in the region of the 11 September attacks on the United States. It has been suggested that the crisis will encourage the GCC rulers to clamp down on (particularly

[51] F. Gregory Gause III, *Oil monarchies: domestic and security challenges in the Arab Gulf states* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994), p. 81.

[52] Richard Augustus Norton, 'The future of civil society in the Middle East', *Middle East Journal* 47: 2, Spring 1993, p. 206.

[53] Michaela Alexandra Prokop, 'Political economy of fiscal crisis in a rentier state: case study of Saudi Arabia', PhD thesis, University of Durham, 1999, p. 208.

[54] In Saudi Arabia's case, for example, it is argued that the elite cannot introduce political reform and at the same time contain the Islamist forces which form one of the regime's key constituencies. Political reform, therefore, may actually expose the state and its institutions to Islamist takeover. See Edward Pilkington, 'Like Dallas policed by the Taliban', *Guardian*, G2 section, 2 July 2002, pp. 2–4.

Islamist) dissent and use this opportunity to backtrack on the promised political reforms. If the crisis were to degenerate into a conflict between Islam and the West, with Saudi Arabia being forced to play a pivotal Islamic role, public opinion across the region might put the more liberal elements in the ruling families on to the defensive, pressurizing them to denounce western-style reforms. It remains to be seen whether this will in fact be the case. But an alternative scenario could also be developed, in which the GCC leaders use this crisis as an opportunity to widen their domestic power base, limit the political influence of the tribes and the Islamists, and push through reforms on both economic and political fronts.[55] Arguably, Bahrain and Qatar provide encouraging evidence for the latter scenario coming to pass in several of the oil monarchies, as the pace of their proposed reforms has actually accelerated since September 2001.

Many problems remain, then. Critics of the oil monarchies point to the broader governance issues, arguing that, for all the reform measures adopted or proposed, power continues to rest in the hands of a family group embedded in the structures of the state. In the absence of decision-making bodies outside the rulers' circle, and of political parties, an accountable and responsive government and ruling elite, transparency in the workings of the government and its agencies, more powerful Shura councils, an effective legal framework for rights, a free press and conditions conducive to the free flow of ideas, these societies remain far from a democratic or pluralistic path. While many of these concerns are valid, one can nevertheless maintain that as elections grow in importance as the most effective transmitter of priorities between state and society, their mediatory role will increase, bringing with them new structures and ideas, and real changes in state–society relations. Such processes also allow the GCC leaders to spread risk in an increasingly globalized world where external crisis can very easily acquire a domestic footing. As Nonneman notes, 'opening up the decision-making process for non-royal actors, and expanding avenues for popular participation, can … spread responsibility for difficult decisions or circumstances, or for government failures'.[56] Reform as a process is now firmly on the agenda of these countries, albeit at a measured pace. We should perhaps recall that Rome was not built in a day, and note in the context of the GCC states that reform from above is still a far preferable route to change than revolution from below.

[55] It has even been suggested by some influential voices in the United States that in the aftermath of 11 September Washington should be pressing its Arab allies to introduce wide-ranging democratic reforms. See e.g. Martin Indyk, 'Back to the bazaar', *Foreign Affairs* 81: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2002, pp. 75–88.

[56] Gerd Nonneman, *Governance, human rights, and the case for political adaptation in the Gulf: issues in the EU–GCC political dialogue*, policy paper 3 (Badia Fiesolana: European University Institute, 2001), p. 5.