The Arab Monarchy Debate

December 19, 2012
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## The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
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It has been widely noted that monarchies have done better at surviving the Arab uprisings that began two years ago. Three Presidents (Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Saleh) have fallen, along with Muammar al-Qaddafi’s unique Jamahiriya, while Bashar al-Assad’s Baathist presidential regime faces a mortal threat. For some analysts and academics, this pattern suggests a fairly obvious “monarchical exception” which demands explanation.

In August, I launched a debate on Foreign Policy about whether and how monarchy matters in explaining the resilience of Arab regimes. I was not impressed. Against arguments that monarchies face some kind of unique legitimacy commanding the loyalty of their people, I noted that Arab monarchies have in fact faced significant popular mobilization over the last two years: Bahrain has had one of the most intense and protracted uprisings anywhere; Kuwait is facing the deepest political crisis in its post-occupation history; Jordan experienced unprecedented protests; Saudi Arabia has had a protracted challenge in its Eastern Province; Oman experienced unusual levels of protest; Morocco’s protest movement drove the king to adopt a significant (if underwhelming) constitutional initiative. I concluded, “the monarchies look like fairly typical Arab authoritarian regimes, surviving because they enjoy greater financial resources, less demanding international allies, and powerful media assets to perpetuate their legitimation myths.”

The responses I got over email, over Twitter, across blogs, and at various academic conferences convinced me that the monarchy question remains an open one, however. It is an important debate for political scientists and analysts, with a wide range of arguments and evidence to consider. Over the last few months, I have reached out to a number of leading scholars to weigh in on the question of Arab monarchy. I asked them to move beyond simple binaries (“monarchy does or doesn’t matter”) to explore the specific mechanisms by which it might matter, to weigh them against competing explanations, and to show how monarchy operated in particular cases which they knew well. Those articles, along with some particularly relevant older Middle East Channel essays, are now collected in today’s new POMEPS Brief, “The Arab Monarchy Debate.”

The debate is an interesting one. Daniel Brumberg pushes us to focus on how different regime types might have comparative advantages in the specific “sustaining mechanisms” of Arab autocrats. Michael Herb makes a guarded case for the distinctive resilience of family monarchies, a unique mechanism for leadership selection explored as well by Gregory Gause. Sean Yom points instead to money, security forces, and foreign patrons, which the monarchies enjoy for reasons that have little to do with monarchy. If these more material explanations are correct, then the monarchs may be in for a rough ride, as Christopher Davidson argues, since many of those assets are wasted ones. In particular, the economic commitments made to ride out the storm may not be sustainable, Steffen Hertog notes.

What about specific countries? Recent POMEPS Briefs have looked in depth at the situations in Jordan, Bahrain, and Kuwait. This collection adds several reflections on Saudi Arabia (by Madawi al-Rasheed, Stephane Lacroix, and Toby Matthiessen); Oman (Ra‘id Al-Jamali); Jordan (Nicholas Seeley); and Morocco (Mohamed Daadoui). These closer looks are particularly helpful at identifying the differences in the nature of monarchy across the region: Jordan’s monarchy simply operates differently, is viewed differently across society, and has a different set of sustaining mechanisms.
compared to the ruling families in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or Kuwait. Monarchs with parliaments have different political horizons than those who rule without elected bodies. For instance, those monarchs with small populations and virtually unlimited financial resources don’t seem to have that much in common with their larger and poorer cousins.

It would be foolish to deny the observable reality that thus far all the Arab monarchs have survived where other regime types have failed. But that has to be a starting point, not a conclusion. From a political science perspective, that should force us to look harder at the specific mechanisms of control, which may or may not sustain specific monarchs in the future. Belief in a “monarchical exception” is useful for the monarchs in their efforts to deflect domestic challenges, reduce expectations of potential change, and maintain international support. It may also contribute to a certain complacency among their foreign allies, who may be relieved at not seeing the need to plan for the possible loss or transformation of such useful partners. I hope that this collection of essays helps to advance this important ongoing debate.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
December 19, 2012
Does Arab monarchy matter?

By Marc Lynch, August 13, 2012

What does it mean that no kings have thus far fallen in the Arab uprisings while four non-monarchical rulers (Ben Ali, Mubarak, Qaddafi, and Saleh) have toppled from their (non-royal) thrones and a fifth has plunged his country into a brutal civil war? Is there a monarchical exception in the Arab world? The significance of monarchy has been one of the most vibrant debates among political scientists over the last two years, as I wrote about a few months ago. A new article in the Journal of Politics by Victor Menaldo claiming statistical evidence for a monarchical advantage prompted me to revisit these arguments this week.

The advantages of monarchy have taken on the feel of “common sense” among the public and in academic debates. But I remain highly skeptical about the more ambitious arguments for a monarchical exception. Access to vast wealth and useful international allies seems a more plausible explanation for the resilience of most of the Arab monarchies. Surviving with the financial resources and international allies available to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) seems like no great trick. The active, concerted economic, political, media, (and occasionally military) Saudi and Qatari support for their less wealthy fellow monarchs seems to be more important to the survival of the current crop of kings than the intrinsic institutional characteristics of a throne.

There has been a robust academic argument over the possible political benefits of monarchy at least since Lisa Anderson’s influential 1991 article “Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy.” The operation of dynastic monarchies in relation to other regime types have been detailed and analyzed in important work by Michael Herb and many other political scientists over the last two decades. That debate intersects in productive ways with broader research trends in political science over the last decade over the many varieties of authoritarianism. In that context, I certainly don’t mean to say that monarchy doesn’t matter at all. It seems obvious that different regime types will create different incentives, institutions, and possibilities for political contention. And the relative survival rate of the monarchies during the Arab uprisings of the last years is certainly suggestive of something. But I remain highly skeptical of the stronger theoretical and policy claims about the positive political benefits of Arab monarchy.

I am particularly not persuaded by arguments that the Arab monarchies enjoy a distinctive legitimacy. Some kings no doubt have been popular due to their personalities, their policies, or their ability to play their assigned role effectively. But it is difficult to reconcile the idea of monarchical legitimacy with the tightly controlled media, carefully cultivated personality cults, and brutally policed “red lines” which generally characterize such regimes. The alleged unique legitimacy of Arab monarchs strikes me as a carefully cultivated and ruthlessly policed political myth that could dissolve as quickly as did the universal adoration for Bashar al-Assad or Muammar al-Qaddafi when challenged. If monarchy confers unique legitimacy on, say, King Abdullah of Jordan, then why the need for a draconian l’ese majeste law criminalizing insulting the king or escalating controls on the online media? Why the need for Kuwait to jail someone for posting a YouTube video of a poem criticizing the emir? Why such concern among the Saudi leadership over the grumblings of the religious establishment?

The claim for a unique legitimacy among the Arab monarchies is further undermined by the fact that they have experienced significant political dissent over the last two years, to which they responded. Kuwait experienced the most dramatic, largest, and most effective political protests in its history, leading to a political crisis which has shut down parliament and for the first time brought the prerogatives of the royal family directly into the public debate. Quiet Oman faced unprecedented levels of protest which forced significant political reforms. Saudi Arabia has faced persistent and growing protest in its Eastern Province,
and forcefully cracked down on dissent elsewhere even as it lavished $130 billion on its restive population. Bahrain’s monarchy survived (for now) against truly massive popular mobilization only through the application of a brutal, sweeping campaign of sectarian repression. Morocco’s monarch diverted popular mobilization through an early offer of limited political reforms, while Jordan’s monarch struggles with growing popular mobilization and an ever-shrinking ruling coalition as his regime fails to effectively adapt. In other words, the resources and capabilities of the Arab monarchies may be different from their non-kingly peers, but the challenges facing them from popular mobilization really were not.

Other popular arguments in the literature for the monarchical exception also strike me as limited. It’s true that the monarchies practice divide and rule, selectively co-opt and repress, and in some cases allow controlled elections to parliaments with limited power -- but is this so different from the games played by Ben Ali, Mubarak, or Assad? Perhaps monarchies offer a sense of predictability to politics and reduce the stakes of competition -- but were Syrians or Egyptians really under the illusion that their leaders might be voted out of office? Perhaps monarchy allows all other citizens to know their place and not get any uppity ideas about a role in governing or oversight of their government’s budgets -- but is such a second-class citizenship really viable in today’s political environment? And can we really say that monarchs are better at offering an inclusive national identity in the face of the virulent anti-Shiite exclusions in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, or the constant exploitation of Transjordanian-Palestinian identity divides in Jordan? (I’d rather not get into Menaldo’s arguments as to why the monarchies have less corruption, since the premise seems so implausible on its face.)

To me, the monarchies look like fairly typical Arab authoritarian regimes, surviving because they enjoy greater financial resources, less demanding international allies, and powerful media assets to perpetuate their legitimation myths. And that means that they will not likely be spared should those assets lose value -- as they well might, given young, often underemployed populations that have some of the highest smartphone and media penetration in the world; dysfunctional political institutions; extravagant promises of public spending which may soon put serious strain on even Gulf budgets; shifting regional political dynamics and reduced U.S. commitments; and uncertain leadership successions. The monarchs may be on offense around the region right now, but their defense might not be as strong as it appears.

To paraphrase one of our great living philosopher kings, the Arab monarchies may be forced to choose among three dreams: the Saudi King’s, Dr. King’s, and Rodney King’s. The monarchs would like their own people and the outside world to believe that they survive because of their effective and benevolent leadership, their unique political culture, and their distinctive legitimacy, which requires no great concessions to meaningful democratic political participation. But that very myth can blind them to the ever more urgent calls by reformists for just such political inclusion, transparency, an end to corruption, and equality of citizenship. The violent repression and angry protests in Manama or Qatif provide stark warning of the danger of believing such comforting mythologies of resilience or legitimacy.

The discussion of Arab monarchy really should be a debate, of course. A lot of smart people do think that monarchy matters, and have developed sophisticated arguments and evidence to support the contention. They may be right. There’s an outstanding literature in political science on the nature of various regime types, to which Middle East specialists have contributed significantly. But if Gulf regimes start to suddenly fall, as predicted in this book by Christopher Davidson, or the popular mobilization which already exists takes on new forms, then the embrace of the monarchical exception could soon look as foolish as did the passion for Lebanese consociationalism in the 1960s, the admiration for the Shah’s developmental state in Iran in the 1970s, or the confidence in the resilience of Arab authoritarian regimes in the 2000s.
As we approach the one-year anniversary of the events that touched off the “Arab Spring,” there is no lack of prudent handwringing. Writing in the Washington Post, my colleague Daniel Byman concludes that with the exception of Tunisia, where democratization is moving apace, “the Arab Spring may not bring freedom to much, or even most, of the Arab world. Even as the United States prepares to work with the region’s new democracies, it also must prepare for the chaos, stagnation and misrule that will mark the Arab Winter.”

There is ample justification for such pessimism. Egypt’s transition has been marred by the military’s repeated violent repression of popular protests, by its periodic efforts to limit the authority of the new parliament, and by the growing fears among Egyptian liberals sparked by the electoral victories of their Islamist rivals. Further afield, Bahrain’s Sunni rulers have crushed a popular movement led mostly by Shiite leaders, Yemen might be plunging into tribal civil war, and Syria seems to be descending into sectarian conflict between a mostly Alawite regime and its mostly Sunni opponents. As for Libya, friction within the National Transitional Council might herald a much wider power struggle -- especially among the 100 or so independent and well-armed militias. Watching these developments, we might ask whether the death knell of authoritarianism in the Arab world was sounded too readily, or at least prematurely?

Perhaps. When the momentous events that shook the Arab world in January 2011 first grabbed the world’s attention, not a few observers eagerly proclaimed the end of “Arab exceptionalism.” In the ensuing year, satellite television and the Internet allowed a world audience to experience -- as they say in the Olympics business -- the thrill of victory to the agony of defeat. Today, we must reckon with a process of authoritarian extraction that could last well into the next decade -- one that promises as many if not more disappointments than successes.

By way of analytical preparation for this long and difficult journey, I would suggest that we begin by jettisoning the term “Arab exceptionalism,” as well as its conceptual relative -- democratic universalism. The assumption that the Arab world was stuck in the deep muck of an authoritarian past is as misleading as the assertion that it suddenly rose up to join teleology of global democratization. The notion that history sleeps or awakens is equally a historical. What we need instead is a pliable conceptualization of the concrete mechanisms of Arab autocracies, and how these mechanisms both sustained and undermined the region’s despots.

For this purpose, I would suggest that we think about Arab autocracies as protection rackets. The latter pivoted around an exchange by which regimes provided a diverse range of groups -- ethnic or religious minorities, the business sector, and secular activists -- with a haven from the uncertainties of an open democratic process. If many elites accepted this bargain, they did so because they feared that competitive elections would produce assemblies that would undercut their de facto social or political liberties in the name of the majority. In the Arab world, autocracy with would-be democrats has been a long-standing phenomenon.

Although united by a common logic, Arab protection rackets differed in terms of their institutional mechanisms, and in terms of the groups that received protection. Minority regimes that imposed their rule over religious majorities, such as the Alawite-Bathist regime in Syria, the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain, or the Sunni-Bathist regime in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, considered democracy a straight path to political (if not physical) suicide. Hence with the short-lived exception of Bahrain, these regimes were “total autocracies” that didn’t tolerate the slightest political openings. Elsewhere, the protection racket was organized around ideological fissures between Islamists and non-Islamists. In Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan, autocracies offered protection to secular elites via
the state-controlled press, state-owned think tanks and universities, and via a private sector business elite whose loyalty was rewarded with privileged access to government contracts and credit.

Note that these authoritarian rackets did not rest solely on protecting non-Islamists. On the contrary, precisely because their efficacy depended on the non-Islamists’ sense of vulnerability, these systems required the state’s toleration of Islamist groups and ideas. Thus with the notable exception of Tunisia, most Arab regimes not only allowed but promoted Islamists groups and ideas. In this way, they encouraged Islamists and non-Islamists to seek ultimate protection from regimes. Where appropriate, this cynical game was also buttressed by the state’s protection of particular ethnic or religious groups, such as the Berbers in Morocco, the Copts in Egypt, or East Bank Bedouins of Jordan. Whatever the formula, this divide and conquer system required some measure of open, if state-controlled, political competition in the press, in the non-government organization (NGO) arena, and in the national electoral arena -- thus the logic of what I called “liberalized autocracy” in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and Yemen.

Over the last decade, the institutional, ideological, economic, and psychological factors supporting Arab protection racket politics began to erode. I argued in 2002 that liberalized autocracy was a “trap” because it did not provide a genuine mechanism for representing competing social, religious, or sectarian interests; and because it was characterized by cycles of regime-led liberalization and de-liberalization that over time robbed regimes of what ever popular legitimacy they might have once commanded.

But recent events suggest that apart from the particular dynamics in liberalized autocracies described above, region-wide forces were weakening protection rackets throughout the Arab world. These included the proliferation of security forces, which made almost daily life hell for the average citizen, the growth of corruption -- particularly among those business elites from the majority community who had been co-opted by minority regimes -- and the expansion of digital communications and technology. In the context of a rapidly expanding class of educated, unemployed middle class youth, these developments not only elicited widespread contempt for the dirty politics of protection rackets: in some cases they encouraged efforts at bridging the ideological or religious divide. Hence the emergence in Egypt of the Kifaya Movement, which was led by Islamist and secular leaders, and by similar (and in the case of Yemen, much more successful) bridge building efforts in other Arab states. Striking at the very heart of protection racket politics, these initiatives were rarely welcomed -- and sometimes violently suppressed -- by ruling regimes.

Global developments magnified the above processes. Despite its glaring inconsistencies and multiple standards, George W. Bush’s “Freedom Agenda” signaled opposition and regime leaders alike that the United States would no longer give Arab dictators unconditional support. It was a measure of the expectations generated by this elemental shift in U.S. foreign policy that during the first year of the Obama administration, the White House was vigorously lobbied by young Arab democrats, eager to push Obama to make good on the multi-dimensional program he outlined in his June 4 Cairo “New Beginning” speech. Some of these youth leaders worked with foreign NGOs that brought Islamists and secular activists to talk about a common reform agenda. These initiatives pointed to a new spirit of cooperation among an emerging cohort of activists who grasped the corrosive implications of the region’s protection rackets.

While it was impossible to predict when and where a major challenge to Arab autocracies would emerge, the fate of these rackets is largely a local affair. Although we should not minimize the impact of the “contagion effect,” or the potentially momentous regional consequences flowing from the decision of Arab League to back NATO’s Libya intervention, and later to impose sanctions on Syria, what counts most is the particular mix of institutional mechanisms used by each Arab regime to sustain protection racket politics, as well as the local identity conflicts that such rackets were designed to exploit.
For example, in Syria and Bahrain, the initially peaceful drive for political reform was violently repressed by minority regimes that concluded that they could not afford making concessions to even the most moderate demands for democratic change. Syria’s quasi-one party state lacks any institutional channels for generating a negotiated solution, while the potentially more supple instrument of monarchical rule in Bahrain was rendered useless by the royal family’s mounting fears of Shiite (“Iranian”) domination. In the first case civil war is possible, while in the second, a quasi-apartheid state could be emerging.

By contrast, Egypt’s powerful military has tried to reinvent protection racket politics in ways that will sustain its influence in a prolonged transition to a more competitive system. While it is too early to tell if this effort will succeed or fail, the Islamist-secular divide continues to provide the military with a rich field of manipulation, as does the wide array of parties, NGOs, and associations that had existed prior to the January 2011 rebellion, and which have proliferated since. Paradoxically, Egypt’s legacy of relatively open -- if state controlled -- politics has hindered opposition unity that is a necessary, if insufficient condition, for a smooth transition to democracy. As a result the future of democracy in Egypt appears to hinge in part on the readiness of Muslim Brotherhood leaders to offer secular elites genuine power sharing in any future government. Absent offers of “credible assurance,” liberal Sunni and Christian Coptic leaders might tacitly support the military’s bid to influence the constitution writing process, not to mention any democratic government that follows it.

Meanwhile, in Tunisia, a protection racket system that was far more closed and repressive than that of Egypt collapsed, thus setting the stage for genuine democratization. Several factors particular to Tunisia account for this more optimistic story. First, because the small, 30,000-man professional military had been long ago subordinated to the political apparatus, Islamist and secular leaders could not easily appeal to any authoritarian enforcer to arbitrate competing visions of democratic life. When the 135,000-strong security forces then demonstrated neither the will nor the capacity to violently repress the uprising, the crony-based ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party melted away, thus leaving Islamists and secularists with little choice but to make peace or fight.

Indeed, the near total collapse of the ruling apparatus created a relatively open and unchartered political field, reducing the opportunities for manipulation by all players. While secularists clearly feared that Islamists had a substantial organizational advantage, no party had sufficient information that might have tempted one or more to pursue transition modalities designed to serve narrow or selfish interests. Even when the September negotiations over the procedures for a constituent assembly seemed at their most polarized, everyone pulled back from the brink and compromised. Finally, the presence of a large urban middle class that cut across the Islamist-secular divide provided further incentive for cooperation. Thus out of the ashes of one of North Africa’s most repressive systems competitive democracy seems to be emerging.

The decline, collapse, or foreign-supported military overthrow of protection racket systems in the Arab world has thus far only occurred in one party, presidential systems. While the case of Bahrain (and perhaps to an extent Kuwait, where political resistance to the Sabah Royal Family remains strong) suggest that monarchies are hardly immune to contentious politics. The fact that the Arab Spring has thus failed to rattle -- much less crack -- the foundations of monarchical autocracy requires explanation.

The structural differences between monarchies and presidential, party-machine systems is one important factor. In Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Syria, presidents were perceived as despots with little or no moral bond with the wider population. Even if these leaders wanted to create (or recreate) such bonds, because they were linked to the ruling apparatus or party, they could not break free of a corrupt system in which they were totally implicated. Thus presidents proved especially poor manipulators of the protection racket system. By contrast, most monarchs have operated at some institutional and symbolic distance from the political arena, and thus had a crucial advantage over
their presidential comrades: they could drape themselves in the flag of national monarchical patriotism and thus be perceived more widely as legitimate (and effective) arbiters of competing social, economic, religious, and ideological interests. Protection racket politics have a certain elective affinity for monarchical systems.

Of course, there are differences within such systems. The single-king monarchies of Morocco and Jordan have had much more success in exploiting the institutional and symbolic advantage of monarchial rule by comparison to the competing-princes model of Qatar, Kuwait, or Saudi Arabia. But even if the built-in mechanism of princely competition has created a more fragmented ruling elite, this somewhat cumbersome mechanism has nevertheless helped to sustain the protection rackets in all three countries.

Morocco’s recent experience suggests that monarchies -- particularly single king systems -- are capable of reinventing protection racket politics with far more panache than their presidential analogues. Seeking to distinguish himself from the Mubaraks and the Ben Alis -- and thus get a jump on the opposition -- in June King Mohammed VI backed constitutional amendments which somewhat enhanced the authority of the parliament, but re-secured his supreme position as “Commander of the Faithful.” Not surprisingly, the Islamist Justice and Development Party embraced this compromise once the King promised that the revised constitution would keep Islam as the basis of national identity. This bargain may have appalled many secular Arab and ethnic Berber elites. But until both groups can be assured that full scale democratization will protect them as efficiently as Morocco’s liberalized autocracy, they are likely to back a jiggering of the old system rather than take to the streets en masse to demand a revolution. In Morocco, the tacit consensus of all key parties required for sustaining autocracy is yet to fall apart.

These mechanics have analogues throughout the globe, particularly in what Larry Diamond has called “hybrid regimes.” Instead of reducing the fate of these regimes to some metaphysical choice between staying out of history or joining it, it is far more useful to see them as part of a multitude of evolving histories that defy easy platitudes about the past or the future. In this sense the Arab Spring is part of a narrative that is both very particular and universal. Although global forces have their role to play, the diverse fates awaiting the region’s autocrats is rooted in local dynamics that will play out in ways that are still untold.

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Monarchism matters

By Michael Herb, November 26, 2012

The Arab Spring was hard on Arab presidents: most of the personalist presidential autocracies are now gone. But no Arab monarchs fell during the Arab Spring. Why did the monarchs fare so well? The strong correlation between monarchism and survival suggests, of course, that monarchism had something (or everything) to do with it. Some scholars, however, have argued the success of the monarchs does not have much to do with their monarchism, but can be traced to other factors, especially oil and foreign support. These factors are not irrelevant, but monarchism still mattered, and for two reasons. The monarchs benefited, first, from their ability to promise reform and, second, from the sense amongst their citizens that, while not ideal, monarchical rule was better than the republican alternatives. These factors, however, are not permanent, and the ability of the monarchs to weather the recent storms does not mean that they will fare as well the next time unrest sweeps the Arab world.

Critics of the importance of monarchism during the Arab Spring have one thing very right: Arab culture is not the explanation. The profile of those who led the demonstrations that brought down the Arab presidents in 2011 -- young, urban, and possessing some measure of education -- in past decades was the profile of the groups most hostile to monarchs. When the Arab new middle class gained control of an army in the 1950s or 1960s, the end was near for the monarch. And the example of neighboring Iran in 1979 suggests that a nation as a whole can turn against its monarch, expelling him in a fit of revulsion that cuts across classes and political inclinations. It may be that monarchs start one step ahead of presidents because they can wrap themselves in tradition more easily (especially when passing power to their sons) but there is no good reason to suppose that Arab monarchs enjoy some sort of permanent lease on the affections of their people.

Neither, however, is oil a guarantee of monarchical survival. The monarchs, it is true, handed out many billions during the Arab Spring in the hope of keeping their people off the streets. If the monarchs did not think all this spending did them some good, or at least was an insurance policy of sorts, they would not have done it. But it is hard to attribute the monarchs’ good fortune only to oil. Libya has oil wealth, and Qaddafi nonetheless faced a widespread rebellion. The oil deprived kings of Morocco and Jordan still rule their kingdoms. It is hard to argue that oil made a difference because it strengthened the repressive capacity of the state: the Syrian state also has a great deal of repressive capacity, and that did not stop Syrians from trying to overthrow their regime. Instead, the spending in the spring of 2011 suggests that the monarchs hoped to buy off their citizens. But this implies a theory of motivation among the citizens of the monarchies which is neither flattering nor entirely plausible. Are Saudis really so easily bought so that some additional spending on housing and salaries will keep them off the streets, despite the many faults of their rulers? What made the demonstrations in the republics different from those in the monarchies was that demonstrators hated their presidents but retained some measure of respect for their kings (though not always for their policies, or their courtiers). That respect, or lingering tolerance, was not purchased. Instead the monarchs benefited from the general sense among the Arab public that the monarchs were not so bad as the presidents.

Bahrain, the monarchy that suffered the most serious protests, illustrates the point. It is the monarchy in which the ruling family enjoys the least support amongst its people -- or, to be precise, amongst the Shiite majority of the Bahraini citizenry. Most ruling families attempt to balance among the various identity groups within their societies, or at least the larger ones. Bahrain’s Al Khalifa instead have built a regime on the basis of the repression of the Shiites. And so the Shiites rose up in the spring of 2011. Given the family nature of the regime, and its powerful foreign friends, there never was much prospect that the Al Khalifa would lose power altogether. But it was
not surprising that Bahrain was the monarchy with the strongest protests.

The rest of the monarchs possessed two key advantages over the presidents in the spring of 2011. First, they profited from comparisons between their rule and that of the presidents. A list of countries in the region once ruled by monarchs is enough to make the point: Iraq, Egypt, Iran, Libya, and Yemen. The rapid diffusion of revolution in 2011 made very clear that Arab publics do make comparisons with other Arab regimes. And this comparison in particular gave rise to a zeitgeist in the Arab world before the Arab Spring in which monarchism enjoyed some measure of tolerance as a regime type that produced better results (or at least less-bad results) than the available alternatives.

A second factor also helped the monarchs: they could make credible promises to implement political reforms. The king of Morocco treated the Arab Spring like a five alarm fire -- and in his first speech, he promised a slew of reforms to steal away the momentum from the protesters on the streets of Morocco’s cities. It worked, in part because his promises were at least somewhat plausible. Compare his strategy to the plight of the Mubarak regime: the elder Mubarak wanted to install his son Gamal as president. To do so, a series of elections needed to be won, and to win these elections the regime became increasingly authoritarian in its last years. A continuation of the Mubarak dynasty in Egypt promised nothing more than more of the same authoritarianism. The king of Morocco could promise reform and hint at constitutional monarchy. He could promise to remove his courtiers, and appoint the winner of the next election to be the prime minister. And, one might plausibly hope, maybe later he could go farther and give the prime minister some of the crucial powers reserved for the palace today.

The problem for monarchs going forward, in the wake of the Arab Spring, is that these two factors are not at all permanent. The zeitgeist, by its nature, can change - and it will change if the new republican regimes succeed. Qaddafi made the worst of the Arab monarchs look good. The new regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and -- who knows, maybe Libya -- might make the monarchs look like despots. Second, the monarchs have promised a great deal of constitutional change, and have delivered very little (with the partial exception of Kuwait). The next time around, promises will not likely be enough: real signs of change will need to be clear. Absent that, the monarchs might wind up going down the road of Bahrain’s ruling family, ruling over an embittered population that no longer believes promises of reform. That would not necessarily doom the monarchs, especially the family businesses of the Gulf. But it would send them down a dead end of discord and repression.

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Why reform in the Gulf monarchies is a family feud

By F. Gregory Gause, III, March 4, 2011

Kuwait and Bahrain have had two different experiences during the winter of Arab discontent. Manama has witnessed the violent suppression of popular protests, followed by the largest mass demonstrations in the state’s history. The standoff between the al-Khalifa regime and the protesters continues. Kuwait has had its own issues, with a much less violent confrontation between political activists and security forces in late 2010, before the events in Tunisia got rolling, and more recent protests by stateless residents (biduns) seeking political and economic equality. But the largest public gathering of Kuwaitis during this period was in late February, when young and old took to the streets to celebrate 50 years of Kuwaiti independence under al-Sabah rule and the 20th anniversary of their liberation from Iraq in 1991. Despite these differences, these two small states -- which combine a ruling family with an elected parliament -- demonstrate how difficult political reform will be in the Persian Gulf monarchies.

The Gulf states are ruled by what Michael Herb, in his 1999 book *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies*, dubbed “dynastic monarchies.” Unlike monarchies in Jordan and Morocco, where the king rules but leaves the day-to-day operations of government to commoner prime ministers and cabinets, in the Gulf states (with the partial exception of Oman) whole families rule. The king or emir (prince) sits atop the pyramid, but ruling family members also fill many other important political positions, in the cabinet, the military, and other government agencies.

Before the unrest began in Bahrain, the prime minister, three of the four deputy prime ministers, and 10 of the 23 cabinet ministers were from the al-Khalifa family. They included the ministers of finance, foreign affairs, interior, defense, justice and Islamic affairs, and housing. Two of the al-Khalifa ministers were fired by the king in late February, but that hardly means an end to family rule in Bahrain. In Kuwait, the prime minister, the first deputy prime minister, two of the three deputy prime ministers, and eight of the 21 ministers are from the al-Sabah family. They include the ministers of defense, interior, foreign affairs, oil, and housing. The governor of the Kuwaiti Central Bank is also an al-Sabah. Similar proportions of ruling family members can be found in the cabinets of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the U.A.E. The Sultan of Oman himself holds the portfolios of prime minister, minister of defense, minister of foreign affairs, minister of finance, and governor of the central bank -- fewer family members in the government but no less of a hold on power by the al-Said family. Government in the Gulf is a family affair.

The dynastic nature of the Gulf monarchies helped them survive the last period of political upheaval in the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s. They were not “one bullet” regimes. The families had a range of talent upon which to draw to run the state. Their wide presence in society provided a built-in intelligence service, keeping the families close to those they ruled. They knew what was going on and thus did not get too far ahead of, or fall too far behind, their subjects. Many heads were better for monarchical survival than the single heads of monarchs in Egypt, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen that were lopped off, either figuratively or literally, in the Arab revolts of that earlier age.

While family rule served the cause of regime stability for the past 40 years, the nature of the current demands raised by political activists in Bahrain and Kuwait are turning the dynastic nature of these regimes into a stumbling block on the road to reform, if not into a potential liability for the rulers themselves. Those Bahraini protesters who are not demanding the replacement of the entire regime are, at a minimum, calling for a government that will be responsible to parliament. In Kuwait, the immediate situation is not as dire for the al-Sabah. However, the recent history of tension and stalemate between the government and the parliament contains a similar logic. Prime Minister Sheikh Nasir Muhammad al-Sabah has
presided over six governments and three elections in the last five years and just barely survived a no-confidence vote in January. Kuwaiti opposition groups are now calling not only for a new prime minister, but also for constitutional changes that will require the government (now appointed directly by the emir) to receive a vote of confidence from parliament before it can take up office. Reform petitions in Saudi Arabia are calling for the separation of the offices of king and prime minister (which have been jointly held since 1964) and an elected rather than appointed legislative body with the power to remove ministers through confidence votes.

It is highly unlikely that cabinets responsible to elected parliaments will comprise as many members of the ruling families as is the case now. So while Gulf kings and emirs can keep their jobs in political deals that make concessions to protesting citizens, becoming more like their friends in Jordan and Morocco, their relatives will very likely lose theirs. Since the first constituency of any dynastic monarch is his own family, proposing political reforms that would vastly decrease family power is likely to excite opposition not just to the reforms, but possibly to the ruler himself. It would take a strong figure to bring his family to heel and accept such a reduced political role. Both the al-Sabah and the al-Khalifa contain plenty of divisions and factions that could be mobilized against the rulers, and neither King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa nor Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah has the reputation as uncontested leader of his extended family. Should either respond to opposition demands and propose constitutional changes that make their governments more responsible to parliament, political reform in the Gulf states could very well become a family feud.

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The survival of the Arab monarchies

By Sean L. Yom, November 12, 2012

Why does monarchy march on while republican dictatorships precariously wobble in the Arab world? The undertow of the Arab Spring reveals how unevenly revolutionary unrest spread throughout the region. While popular uprisings rocked the autocratic republics, not a single ruling monarchy fell. Opposition stood quiet in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), while Oman and Saudi Arabia saw only isolated agitation. Popular reform movements mobilized in Jordan and Morocco, but they fizzled out. Ongoing protests in Kuwait reflect a longstanding tradition of civic activism and political contestation that far predates the Arab Spring. Only Bahrain experienced new large-scale unrest, but military intervention by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ended the troubles.

While many observers point to cultural reasons and institutional machinations as the answers, in reality two hard strategic factors best explain the resilience of royalism: oil and geopolitics.

The most popular explanation is that absolute monarchism resonates with the religious and tribal values of Arab culture, and that therefore enjoys legitimacy. Ethnocentrism aside, this is a circular argument. The absence of revolution cannot mean legitimacy, for by that
definition all regimes are legitimate until the day they collapse. If legitimacy means the lack of popular revolt, then many monarchies already fail this litmus test -- either now, as in Bahrain’s recent failed uprising, or in the past, as the kingships of Morocco, Jordan, and Oman all suffered violent conflicts in the 1960s or 1970s. Indeed, history is the harshest critic of all. No royal legitimacy safeguarded the monarchies of Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, North Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, and Iran from their ignominious overthrow in the latter half of the twentieth century, with some (as in Iran and Iraq) suffering at the hands violent revolutionaries who were all but loyal and submissive.

If not some exotic cultural essence, what about institutional wizardry? Some scholars believe that kings have the unique capacity to halt public anger by imposing liberalizing reforms and engaging public demands. Yet having the institutional means to pacify opposition does not guarantee the desire to do so. Morocco and Jordan responded to popular mobilization with constitutional reform, but youth activists fared worse in the Gulf kingdoms, whose regimes embrace repression over compromise. Another argument concerns the institutional practice of dynasticism: royal families can stick together and monopolize state resources, thereby ensuring a united front. However, the same unity can also make kings and emirs beholden to powerful hardline relatives, who fear losing status and wealth if reforms become too bold. In recent years, the kings of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait have all learned this hard lesson.

Culture and institutions falter because they suggest that something inherent within absolute monarchism explains their survival. In reality, the Arab kingdoms have weathered the revolutionary storm for exogenous reasons -- they happen to float in a sea of hydrocarbon and geopolitical riches, which have allowed them to capture sufficient domestic support and vital international assistance.

Those who doubt the importance of oil wealth in preventing national unrest during the Arab Spring should ask one question: if presidents like Hosni Mubarak or Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali discovered $100 billion in hydrocarbon riches when besieged by the underserved middle-class, would they have exited office so hastily? Since 2011, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf kingdoms -- and for that matter, non-monarchical Algeria -- have spent hundreds of billions of dollars for programs ranging from cash grants and salary increases to developmental projects and job creation. The logic is simple: well-fed citizens with well-paying jobs do not revolt. Those that do can be effectively branded by regime spinsters as radicals and terrorists.

Some doubters may point to Libya, where Muammar al-Qaddafi lost power despite sitting atop large oil fields. To be sure, leaders must only have these resources, but also expend them wisely by pacifying sectors of potential opposition and mobilizing public support. For this task of coalition-building, monarchies wield no intrinsic advantage. After all, oil-rich kingships in Iraq (1958) and Iran (1979) suffered deposal by committing the same violent repression and corrupt personalism as did the Arab Spring’s republican victims. No single regime type has a monopoly on brutality.

Of course, not all Arab monarchies swim in material affluence. Bahrain is fast depleting its oil and gas reserves, and Jordan and Morocco have no hydrocarbon wellsprings at all, resulting in chronic fiscal difficulty. Yet oil wealth has long circulated across Arab borders through aid ties. Months into 2011, wealthy Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE offered a $5 billion jackpot to Morocco and Jordan should they join the GCC, and pledged a $20 billion Gulf fund to aid more modest Bahrain and Oman. These aid packages, much like past assistance from Arab oil donors, mostly comprise fungible grants rather than conditional loans, and so can be spent by recipients just like domestic revenue. For instance, in late 2011 Jordan reduced a multi-billion dollar budget deficit driven by price subsidies, job promises, and security spending with an infusion of Saudi cash alongside its regular foreign aid haul from the United States.

In addition to the oil factor, many Arab monarchies enjoy staunch backing by foreign powers given their geopolitical
locale. The United States had no bases in Libya before it intervened, but the Fifth Fleet anchors in Bahrain, whose unending suppression of the opposition still registers negligent protest by Washington. The same relationship holds for the other Gulf states, on whose territory U.S. military and intelligence assets need to operate if they are to monitor Iraq and contain Iran. Likewise, the recent deployment of U.S. troops to Jordan reflects the strategic value of keeping the Hashemite Kingdom stable, as it abuts Israel and borders Syria and Iraq, while France is in little rush to even gently prod Morocco toward democratization after losing its Tunisian client regime.

For autocratic rulers, external assistance such as this lowers the cost of repression by reducing the prospects of international backlash. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, whose fallen autocrats received mixed Western signals until the end, those Arab leaders residing in the monarchical states have harvested unambiguous support from every global power. Certainly, some dictatorships can continue to plow through opposition even in the face of international resistance, but continuous foreign patronage makes it all the more cheap.

As a last resort, external actors can protect embattled regimes through coercive means, which the Bahraini case exemplifies. The Arab Spring featured two military interventions, but whereas NATO operations helped destroy the Qaddafi regime in Libya, GCC troops with Western complicity did the reverse in Bahrain. Their physical presence enabled the Khalifa monarchy to regain domestic control and liquidate its opposition movement, and ensured the Saudi state that its neighboring island kingdom would remain under rule by an allied Sunni family. To be sure, the fallen Arab republics had also reaped various kinds of Western coercive assistance, as in the $1 billion-plus U.S. arms and training package that Mubarak earned annually. Yet handing over obsolete fighter jets and outdated radar systems is very different than putting foreign boots on the ground: autocrats cannot deploy heavy military weaponry in tight urban spaces without destroying entire city blocks, as the Syrian civil war has shown.

The Bahraini example is telling in another way. In late February 2011, over 100,000 citizens (nearly 20 percent of the country’s population) marched against the regime. In proportional terms, this was far greater than the relative handful who mobilized in Tunisia and Egypt. Had Bahrain actually experienced revolution, arguments about the so-called exceptionalism of Arab monarchy would no longer be as vocal. However, the Khalifa dynasty emerged unscathed not because of royal legitimacy or institutional manipulation, but because it used its modest hydrocarbon revenue to deepen support among Sunni groups while exploiting ironclad GCC guarantees of protection to squash the largely Shiite opposition. These external factors can benefit non-monarchical states, and indeed they did. Algeria’s oil and gas wealth proved instrumental in providing well-timed public benefits during the Arab Spring, much like Yemen’s presidential transition was hastened by Saudi intervention.

In short, the Arab monarchies are exceptional, but not because they are monarchies. They are beneficiaries of geological fortune, geographic providence, and strategic attention by outside powers. Remove these factors -- rob Saudi Arabia of its oil wealth, deprive Jordan of its Western support, denude Bahrain of GCC intervention, remove France from the Moroccan equation -- and the possibility of monarchical downfall is no longer as far-fetched. Inversely, all this being equal, it is difficult to imagine that Egyptian or Tunisian activists would have delayed their dreams of dignity at the command of a King Mubarak or Emir Ben Ali.

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Yes, the Gulf monarchies are in trouble

By Christopher M. Davidson, November 13, 2012

At first glance the Gulf monarchies look stable, at least compared to the broader region. In reality, however, the political and economic structures that underpin these highly autocratic states are coming under increasing pressure, and broad swathes of citizens are making hitherto unimaginable challenges to the ruling elites.

These six monarchies -- Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman -- have faced down a number of different opposition movements over the years. However, for the most part, these movements have not been broad-based and have tended to represent only narrow sections of the indigenous populations. Moreover, given their various internal and external survival strategies -- including distributive economic systems and overseas soft power accumulation -- the incumbent regimes have generally been in strong, confident positions, and have usually been able to placate or sideline any opposition before it could gain too much traction. In most cases the Gulf monarchies have also been very effective at demonizing opponents, either branding them as foreign-backed fifth columns, as religious fundamentalists, or even as terrorists. In turn this has allowed rulers and their governments to portray themselves to the majority of citizens and most international observers as safe, reliable upholders of the status quo, and thus far preferable to any dangerous and unpredictable alternatives. Significantly, when modernizing forces have begun to impact their populations -- often improving communications between citizens or their access to education -- the Gulf monarchies have been effective at co-option, often bringing such forces under the umbrella of the state or members of ruling families, and thus managing to apply a mosaic model of traditional loyalties alongside modernization even in the first few years of the 21st century.

More recently, however, powerful opposition movements have emerged that have proved less easy to contain. As a combined result of mounting internal pressures faced by the Gulf monarchies (including declining resources, rising unemployment, and embattled subsidies) and the emergence of new modernizing forces which have proved harder for their governments to co-opt (including social media, satellite television, and smart phones), an increasing number of Gulf nationals have become emboldened enough to protest against and openly criticize their rulers. Since 2011, clearly spurred on by developments elsewhere in the region, these opponents have been able to present the most serious challenges yet to the various ruling families. In something of a perfect storm for the incumbent regimes, the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria have not only given hope for those Gulf nationals and Gulf-based movements committed to serious political reform and unseating the current autocracies, but they have also made it harder for the Gulf monarchies to depict their new enemies as anything other than pro-democracy activists or disillusioned citizens who have recognized the inevitable collapse of the political and economic structures underpinning their rulers. That’s not to say that the regimes do not still apply old strategies, it’s just that the resulting claims are now a little less believable: Iran-backed Shiites in Bahrain, Egypt-backed Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, a British coup underway in the UAE with local allies, etc.

Furthermore, the Arab Spring revolutions -- or at least the first few waves of protest in Tunisia and Egypt -- have also helped expose the Gulf monarchies’ strong preference for supporting other authoritarian states in the region and their fear of having democratic, representative governments take shape in neighboring states. Certainly the initial responses of most of the Gulf monarchies were markedly anti-Arab Spring. This has had a massive delegitimizing effect on the ruling families and governments involved, as in the eyes of many citizens they have positioned themselves as a distinct and anachronistic counter-revolutionary bloc.
Unsurprisingly the new, post-2011 opposition in the Gulf monarchies has manifested in different ways depending on the individual circumstances and pressures in each state. This has ranged from full-blown street riots complete with killings and martyrs in the poorer Gulf monarchies to more subtle intellectual and even Internet-led “cyber opposition” in the wealthier Gulf monarchies. But in all cases the regimes have had to respond with more repression than ever before, thus further delegitimizing the ruling families. In some instances the monarchies have instituted brutal police crackdowns or have deployed foreign mercenaries while in others they have taken political prisoners, manipulated judicial systems, and further stymied civil society. They have invoked the Koran to justify bans on protests and underpin instructions to citizens to obey their masters. Thus far only Qatar has really managed to avoid such heavy-handedness, mostly due to its more favorable circumstances and its rather different stance on the Arab Spring. Nevertheless even its ruling family is not without critics, and there are already indications of significant internal discord.

As the situation continues to escalate, the Gulf monarchies seem firmly set to push ahead with repression and censorship. They have put in place sophisticated police states and censorship systems; brought in foreign soldiers -- in Abu Dhabi’s case from as far afield as Columbia and South Africa; and closed down almost all genuine civil society organizations. Banking on international silence or indifference from superpower protectors in the face of human rights abuses in return for guaranteeing regional stability, the rulers are preparing to tackle the Arab Spring head-on, with probably no stones left unturned.

All three of the core assumptions about monarchical stability in the region are thus now firmly and permanently exposed as being untrue: that there are enough resources for governments to keep distributing wealth to their citizens in exchange for political acquiescence; that the bulk of Gulf citizens are apolitical or view the tribal system as the only authentic system of governance; and that the rulers themselves are pious, peaceful, and generally well meaning. The reality, of course, is that there are now large numbers of involuntarily unemployed Gulf nationals, large pockets of poverty, and declining resources in economies that have largely failed to diversify away from hydrocarbon exports. Moreover, there is now clearly a modern, well-connected, and increasingly well-educated population of younger citizens who are no longer willing to live by the old rules, are openly expressing their contempt with the status quo, and -- in many cases -- express solidarity with Arab Spring movements elsewhere in the region. Finally, and most importantly, the vicious crackdowns and arbitrary detentions that have been taking place as regimes have sought to silence these voices are tragic, but are nonetheless helping to dispel the illusion that these unelected, unaccountable rulers have anything in common with the tribal, benevolent rulers of the pre-oil era.

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The costs of counter-revolution in the GCC

By Steffen Hertog, May 31, 2011

The reaction in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies to the uprisings coursing through the Arab world has leaned heavily toward the politics of patronage. Saudi Arabia, Oman, and even Bahrain have met political challenges in part with lavish financial inducements to key sectors of society. Such soft counter-revolutionary strategies seem astute in the short run, as they buy allegiance instead of breeding resentment, and allow regimes to avoid the international opprobrium which comes with undue violence. In the long run, however, they threaten to undermine not only the fiscal sustainability of GCC regimes, but also their strategies to integrate their national populations into a diversifying economy.

Saudi Arabia has a history of throwing money at its most severe domestic problems. The kingdom has seen two severe political crises in the last four decades: the occupation of the Grand Mosque in 1979 by the Juhayman group, and the domestic backlash to the presence of 500,000 U.S. troops in the wake of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In both cases, the al-Saud reacted to political instability with increased subsidies, reductions in government fees and other patronage measures. But those past giveaways, although substantial, pale in comparison with the welfare decrees issued in February and March 2011.

With a total estimated volume of $130 billion, the new spending measures are larger than the total annual government budget was as recently as 2007. They include the creation of 60,000 new jobs in the Ministry of Interior -- an agency that is already said to employ almost as many nationals as the whole Saudi private sector -- the building of 500,000 houses, the setting of a minimum wage of 3,000 Saudi Riyals ($800) in the public sector, one-time bonus payments for incumbent civil servants, the creation of a general unemployment assistance scheme, budget increases for various public credit agencies as well as supplementary funds for a number of religious organizations. Some of the spending is immediate, while other components will be rolled out during the coming years.

Many Saudis see the extra cash for religious institutions, including the religious police, as a reward for their vocal public stance against potential anti-regime demonstrations. Amendments to the Saudi media law announced in late April made it a crime to publish any material that insults the kingdom's grand mufti, members of the Council of Senior Ulama and government officials. Dissidents feel that the regime is circling the wagons, and is underwriting its strategy with targeted patronage measures.

The plan to build new houses is arguably the most economically rational component of the spending packages: Although it could cause short-term inflation due to bottlenecks in the construction sector, the shortage of housing for middle and lower class Saudis is a pressing social issue. Home ownership is out of the financial reach of most young nationals, many of whom live with their parents into their late twenties. The inability to pay for their own abode, and the concomitant inability to start a family, has fueled much of the frustration of young protesters all across the Arab world.

In the face of high youth unemployment, the envisaged unemployment assistance scheme also appears a timely move, although the monthly benefit level of 2000 SR announced in March struck local observers as high: The private sector, which remains dominated by foreign employees, provides some 8 million jobs in total, but only about half a million of those pay more than 3000 SR per month. The average wage is closer to 1000 SR.

The provision of more public jobs is a more problematic trend: already now, an estimated 45 percent of the government’s total outlays are for salaries, an exceptionally high share in global comparison. The kingdom has stepped up the creation of public jobs since 2008. But if the aim is
to soak up all or most of the young Saudis who will enter the job market in the coming years, the government faces a losing battle: Some 400,000 men and women enter working age every year, a volume that even the most generous bureaucracy cannot absorb. Together with the new minimum wage of 3000 SR in the public sector, however, the renewed drive to create state jobs is likely to drive young Saudis out of the private labor market and into the waiting loop for a government position.

Saudi Arabia is calm for the time being: Its opposition is ideologically polarized and badly organized, King Abdullah is popular among important parts of the population, and the regime continues to command wide-ranging patronage networks. It can also afford to be more honest about what it is -- a conservative, kin-based monarchy without democratic pretensions -- than the hypocritical and corrupt republican dynasties that have fallen or are trembling now. In the long run, however, the patronage formula that the regime relies on could come under increasing stress. Already now, the oil price at which the Saudi budget breaks even lies above $80 per barrel. It was closer to $20 just a decade ago. The kingdom’s current overseas reserves are large, but so are its budgetary needs.

Bahrain and Oman are the two GCC countries that have witnessed serious oppositional mobilization in recent months, and their fiscal reaction to the crisis closely resembles the Saudi one. In addition to a massive housing program, the Bahraini government has promised 20,000 new jobs in its own Ministry of Interior, a huge number relative to a national population of less than 600,000. In Oman, the government has announced increases in subsidies for commodities, higher welfare and pensions payments as well as the creation of 50,000 new jobs, of which 35,000 are to be provided by the public sector.

In the wake of demonstrations and strikes in Bahrain and Oman, their richer GCC neighbors have recently promised 20 billion dollars to support development in the two countries -- a good share of which will have to be coughed up by Saudi Arabia. In the mid-term, relatively resource-poor Oman and Bahrain run the danger of becoming a fiscal ward of their better endowed neighbors. Bahrain’s sovereign ratings have already been downgraded in March, while Oman is on review for potential downgrades.

The revolutionary wave has largely spared the high-rent GCC monarchies with small national populations: Qatar, Kuwait and UAE. Pressures to throw around money have hence been less acute. The UAE government has nonetheless committed to spending $1.6 billion on infrastructure in the poorer and potentially restless northern emirates, raised military pensions by 70 percent and started subsidizing bread and rice.

The politics of patronage do not only put rising pressure on national budgets, but also undermine strategies to increase national participation in private labor markets -- a sine qua non of long-term economic sustainability. Easy and well-paid public sector jobs lift nationals’ wage expectations and thereby price them out of the private market, weaken incentives to acquire education that is relevant in the private economy, and reinforces an entitlement mentality that can be politically explosive when the going gets tough. Expectations are easy to raise but difficult to curb, creating a ratchet effect that demands ever larger outlays during every political crisis. Almost all past attempts to reduce entitlements of GCC populations -- public jobs, subsidies, cheap utilities etc. -- have come to naught.

It is a lot nicer to be thrown money at than to be shot at and tortured, but neither strategy of containing political challenges appears sustainable. The demography of the GCC’s national populations is similar to that of the rest of the region: the ranks of the young are swelling and their aspirations rising. Expectations of lucrative and low-effort public jobs are bound to be disappointed one day. By shifting precious resources toward a bloated bureaucracy, the regimes are kicking the employment problem down the road -- and making it worse, as incipient private job creation for nationals is undermined.

The chances that the GCC’s long-term socio-economic challenges of demographic growth and youth unemployment will be solved now look a good deal worse.
than just a few months ago. For the high-rent countries, the issue will remain largely academic for decades to come. But depending on oil price developments, it could become an existential worry for Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia before the end of the decade. The breakeven oil prices for GCC budgets have increased significantly in the past few months. Bahrain probably already needs a per barrel price above $100, while the Institute of International Finance predicts a Saudi breakeven price of $110 for 2015. These should be sobering numbers for those who believe that the GCC can always buy its way out of trouble.

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Yes, it could happen here

By Madawi Al-Rasheed, February 28, 2011

In the age of Arab revolutions, will Saudis dare to honor Facebook calls for anti-government demonstrations on March 11? Will they protest at one of Jeddah’s main roundabouts? Or will they start in Qatif, the eastern region where a substantial Shiite majority has had more experience in real protest? Will Riyadh remain cocooned in its cloak of pomp and power, hidden from public gaze in its mighty sand castles?

Saudi Arabia is ripe for change. Despite its image as a fabulously wealthy realm with a quiescent, apolitical population, it has similar economic, demographic, social, and political conditions as those prevailing in its neighboring Arab countries. There is no reason to believe Saudis are immune to the protest fever sweeping the region.

Saudi Arabia is indeed wealthy, but most of its young population cannot find jobs in either the public or private sector. The expansion of its $430 billion economy has benefited a substantial section of the entrepreneurial elite -- particularly those well connected with the ruling family -- but has failed to produce jobs for thousands of college graduates every year. This same elite has resisted employing expensive Saudis and contributed to the rise in local unemployment by hiring foreign labor. Rising oil prices since 2003 and the expansion of state investment in education, infrastructure, and welfare, meanwhile, have produced an explosive economy of desires.

Like their neighbors, Saudis want jobs, houses, and education, but they also desire something else. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq in 2003, they have expressed their political demands in their own way, through petitions that circulated and were signed by hundreds of activists and professionals, men and women, Sunnis, Shiites, and Ismailis. Reformers petitioned King Abdullah to establish an elected consultative assembly to replace the 120-member appointed Consultative Council Saudis inherited from King Fahd. Political organizers were jailed and some banned from travel to this day. The “Riyadh spring” that many reformers anticipated upon King Abdullah’s accession in 2005 was put on hold while torrential rain swept away decaying infrastructure and people in major cities. Rising unemployment pushed the youth toward antisocial behavior, marriages collapsed, the number of bachelors soared, and the number of people under the poverty line increased in one of the wealthiest states of the Arab world. Today, nearly 40 percent of Saudis ages 20 to 24 are unemployed.
Meanwhile, scandal after scandal exposed the level of corruption and nepotism in state institutions. Princes promised to establish investigative committees, yet culprits were left unpunished. Criticism of the king and top ruling princes remained taboo, and few crossed the red line surrounding the substantial sacrosanct clique that monopolizes government posts from defense to sports. The number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience swelled Saudi prisons. Under the pretext of the war on terror, the Saudi regime enjoyed a free hand. The interior minister, Prince Nayef, and his son and deputy, Prince Mohammed, rounded up peaceful activists, bloggers, lawyers, and academics and jailed them for extended periods. Saudis watched in silence while the outside world either remained oblivious to abuses of human rights or turned a blind eye in the interests of oil, arms, and investment.

“We are not Tunisia,” “We are not Egypt,” “We are not Libya,” (and perhaps in a month’s time, “We are not the Arab world”) have become well-rehearsed refrains of official Saudi political rhetoric in recent weeks. There is some truth in this: Carrots are often the currency of loyalty in oil-rich countries, including its wealthiest kingdom. But the Saudi royal family uses plenty of sticks, too. Public relations firms in Riyadh, Washington, and London ensure that news of the carrots travels as far as possible, masking unpleasant realities in one of the least transparent and most authoritarian regimes in the Persian Gulf. What cannot be hidden anymore are the political, economic, and social problems that oil has so far failed to address.

When Saudis were poor and lagged behind the world in education, aspirations, and infrastructure, oil was the balm that healed all social wounds. The wave of coups d’état that swept the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s did not make much impression on Saudis, despite some agitation here and there. Few Saudis were impressed by the effervescence of Arab revolutionary or liberation movements. At the time, most Saudis lacked the education or inclination to question their government, apart from a handful of activists and agitators, including a couple of princes. By the 1970s, oil wealth was developing their taste for the consumer economy and the pleasures of cars, planes, running water, air-conditioning, and sunglasses. Political participation wasn’t part of the package.

Today, oil remains abundant, but Saudis are different. They enjoy more consumption and liquidity than others in the Arab world, but less than those in neighboring Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Saudis are today looking for something else. They are young -- youth under 30 account for two-thirds of the Saudi population -- educated, connected, and articulate. Above all, they are familiar with the global discourse of democracy, freedom, entitlement, empowerment, transparency, accountability, and human rights that has exploded in the face of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world since January. They watch satellite channels like Al Jazeera and eagerly consume news from uprisings around the region.

So far young Saudis have occupied their own “Liberation Square” on a virtual map. In the 1990s their exiled Islamist opposition used the fax machine to bombard the country with messages denouncing the leadership and calling for a return to pristine Islam. Later, a wider circle of politicized and nonpoliticized young Saudis ventured into Internet discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, and more recently Facebook and Twitter to express themselves, mobilize, and share grievances. These virtual spaces have become natural homes for both dissenting voices and government propaganda. Recently the king’s private secretary and chief of the royal court, Khaled al-Tuwaijri, launched his own Facebook page.

Saudis thought that they were safe in their virtual world, but the regime has been determined to trace each and every word and whisper that challenges its version of reality. Young bloggers, writers, and essayists have been jailed for asking simple questions like: Who is going to be king after Abdullah? Where is oil wealth going? Who is responsible for corruption scandals associated with arms deals? Why do the king and crown prince take turns leaving the country? Why are Abdullah’s so-called reforms thwarted by his brother Prince Nayef? And who is the real ruler of Saudi Arabia? All unanswered taboo questions.
On Feb. 23, King Abdullah, 87 and frail, having spent three months abroad undergoing from two operations in New York and recuperating in Morocco, was brought back to Riyadh amid a package of welfare promises worth $36 billion. These were for the most part a rather transparent attempt to appease the burgeoning youth population and deflect it from the lure of revolution -- public-sector salary increases, unemployment benefits, and subsidies for housing, education, and culture.

In years past, such handouts have been welcomed by a population that has grown used to royal largesse, but now the economy of unmet desires is raising the bar. The king, too old and too weak, may have misread the level of disappointment among many Saudis of all political persuasions, who are voicing their complaints on the Internet. The common thread is a demand for genuine political reform. All signs suggest that Saudis are in a rush to seize this unprecedented opportunity to press for serious political change. The response to King Abdullah’s handouts on Saudi Facebook sites is the refrain “Man cannot live by bread alone.”

Of course, it’s not just liberals who are demanding change. A couple of weeks before the king’s return, a group of Saudi academics and professionals announced the establishment of a Salafi Islamic Ummah Party and launched a website. Reformist Salafists are calling for democracy, elections, and respect for human rights. Five of the founding members were immediately put in jail. The king’s brother, Prince Talal, disenchanted and politically marginalized but extremely wealthy, went on BBC Arabic television to praise the king and criticize other powerful royal players, the so-called Sudairi Seven (including Crown Prince Sultan, the defense minister; Prince Nayef, the interior minister, and Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh) without naming them. He revived his 1960s call for constitutional monarchy, which is now being endorsed by some Saudi activists. To date, 119 activists have signed the petition calling for constitutional monarchy. More petitions signed by a cross section of Saudi professionals, academics, and journalists are circulating on the Internet. A broad swatch of Saudi society is now demanding political change.

If Saudis do respond to calls for demonstrations and rise above the old petition syndrome, the majority will be young freethinkers who have had enough of the polarization of Saudi Arabia into two camps: a liberal and an Islamist one, with the Al-Saud family presiding over the widening gap between the two. They want political representation and economic opportunities. An elected parliament is demanded by all.

So far, Saudi Shiites have remained relatively silent, with only minor protests in the Eastern Province. Having watched the Feb. 14 massacre in Bahrain’s Pearl Roundabout, they may hesitate to act alone. If they do, it would be quite easy for the regime to mobilize the Sunni majority and crush their protest, exactly as it did in 1979. In fact, the Shiites would do the regime a great favor at a critical moment when its legitimacy among the majority of Sunnis in the country cannot be taken for granted.

The Shiites may have to wait until they form solid coalitions with mainstream Saudi society to remove any sectarian dimension to their demands. The Hijazis along the western coast would be natural allies, as their complaints about the poor infrastructure of their main city Jeddah may act as a catalyst to push for more political rights and autonomy. A liberal constituency there would be more receptive to overtures from the Shiites of the Eastern Province. If Jeddah and Qatif were to unite in their demands, Riyadh would look more isolated than at any other time. It has many supporters among its historical Najdi constituency, but even they are flirting with the global discourse of freedom. And now some Salafists, the puritanical literal interpreters of Islam, are calling for a real shura, in other words democracy.

It seems that the kingdom is at a crossroads. It must either formulate a serious political reform agenda that will assuage an agitated young population or face serious upheavals over the coming months. To respond to public demands, the agenda should above all start with a written constitution, limit the rule of the multiple royal circles of power within the state, regulate royal succession, inaugurate an elected parliament, and open up the political
sphere to civil society organizations. Hiding behind Islamic rhetoric such as “Our constitution is the Quran” is no longer a viable escape route. Many Saudis are disenchanted with both official and dissident Islam. They want a new political system that matches their aspirations, education, and abilities, while meeting their basic human, civil, and political rights.

Like other falling Arab regimes before them, the ruling Al-Saud will inevitably seek to scare the population by raising the specter of al Qaeda and warning against tribal, regional, and sectarian disintegration. They will try to thwart political change before it starts. Saudis may not believe the scaremongers. The command centers of the Arab revolutions today are not the caves of Tora Bora or Riyadh’s shabby al-Suwaidi neighborhood, where jihadists shot BBC journalist Frank Gardner and his cameraman in 2004. They are the laptops of a young, connected, knowledgeable, but frustrated generation that is rising against the authoritarian public and private families that have been crushing the individual in the pursuit of illusions and control.

Yes, Egypt was key to the coming change, but when Saudis rise they will change the face of the Arab world and its relations with the West forever. Now is the time for the United States and its allies to understand that the future does not lie with the old clique that they have tolerated, supported, and indulged in return for oil, security, and investment. At a time of shifting Arabian sands, it is in the interest of America and the rest of the world to side with the future not the past.

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Saudi Islamists and the potential for protest

By Stéphane Lacroix, June 2, 2011

Saudi Arabia has remained fairly quiet during the recent months of Arab uprisings. A few demonstrations did take place, mostly in the Eastern Province, but never gathered more than a couple of thousands. As for the Facebook calls for a “Saudi revolution” on March 11, they had no real impact on the ground. Some observers found this surprising, given the fact that many of the causes of revolutions elsewhere in the region exist in Saudi Arabia. There is corruption, repression, and, despite the country’s wealth, socioeconomic problems that particularly affect the youth -- it is said that at least 25 percent of Saudis below age 30 are unemployed.

Some observers argued that nothing had happened, or even could happen, in Saudi Arabia because the kingdom possesses two extraordinary resources in huge quantities. This first is a symbolic resource, religion, through the regime’s alliance with the official Wahhabi religious establishment, while the second resource is a material one, oil. These resources, however, have their limits. The real reason that Saudi Arabia has not seen major protests is that the Saudi regime has effectively co-opted the Sahwa, the powerful Islamist network which would have to play a major role in any sustained mobilization of protests.
Neither Islam nor oil wealth necessarily shield the Saudi state from criticism. Religion can be, and has been, contested by opponents of the state, particularly by Islamists. The Wahhabi religious establishment is currently led by relatively weak figures. The current mufti Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh lacks the strong credentials of his predecessor, Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz. Oil money, however abundant, inevitably creates frustrations because its distribution follows established networks of patronage that favor some over others. This is especially notable at the regional level, where Najd receives much more of the state’s largesse than does the kingdom’s periphery. What is more, the announcement on March 18 by King Abdullah of a $100 billion aid package wasn’t only met by cheers as some expected. It also provoked angry reactions in some intellectual circles, which saw this as an insult to the Saudis’ “dignity.”

Saudi Arabia has more of a history of political mobilization than many realize. A pro-democracy current has evolved over the last 10 years. Its core component has historically been the dozens of intellectuals, Sunnis and Shiites, of Islamist and liberal backgrounds who have come together since 2003 to repeatedly demand, through increasingly provocative petitions, the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in the kingdom. Among the latest, and boldest, moves made by members of this group have been the creation in October 2009 of the kingdom’s first fully independent human rights organization, the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, and the establishment in February of the kingdom’s first political party, Hizb al-Umma. Although members of this group have been repressed, many have pledged to continue their activism.

In addition to those older and more experienced intellectuals, a new generation of young political activists is gaining increasing influence. They are connected through social networks, especially Facebook and Twitter, and count among their “friends” numerous young Egyptian and Yemeni activists, whose revolutionary “know-hows” they have been sharing in the last few months. They are idealistic and bold, and they do not feel bound by old political allegiances. Many have subscribed to the demands for a constitutional monarchy of the older intellectuals, providing them with the young base that they were lacking. In a way, the profile of these young activists is very similar to that of some in the April 6 movement in Egypt. And like the April 6, they could well act as a trigger for change.

But if these young people resemble the April 6 movement, then there exists in Saudi Arabia a group that shares the same characteristics and occupies a similar position in the system as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: The Sahwa (or al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya, the Islamic Awakening) is an Islamist group whose ideology is based on a mix between Wahhabi ideas in religion and the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideas in politics.

Like the Brotherhood in Egypt, the Sahwa in Saudi Arabia is by far the largest and best organized nonstate group, with arguably hundreds of thousands of members. Its mobilizing capacity is huge, far ahead of any other group, including the tribes which have for the last few decades lost a lot of their political relevance. An illustration of this were the 2005 municipal elections, which provided observers with an unprecedented opportunity to measure the ability of Saudi political actors to mobilize their supporters. In most districts of the major cities, Sahwa-backed candidates won with impressive scores.

It is therefore unlikely that any popular movement would take hold without the Sahwa’s support because generating a sustained political challenge to the state requires organized and committed activists, solid mobilizing structures, and networks -- things that can’t simply be obtained through Facebook and that only the Sahwa can provide. Again, Sahwis are like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: They may not start the protest, but it won’t succeed without them.

This is where the Saudi case is different from others. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood may have long ceased being a confrontational force when the January 25 revolution started, but it still represented a clear opposition to the Egyptian state. The Sahwa, however, has a different track record. Although its members may be very critical of the
Saudi state in private, they have generally remained loyal to it. There is an organic, almost incestuous, relationship that exists between the Sahwa and the Saudi state. While Islamist movements in most countries developed on the margins of the state and against it, the Sahwa was the product of the co-optation of foreign members of the Muslim Brotherhood into the Saudi state in the 1950s and 1960s. It developed and spread from the state, heavily benefiting from the state’s structures and resources. The fear of losing this very favorable position that the Sahwa occupies has, until now, represented a key obstacle to its transformation into a real opposition movement.

This explains why the majority of Sahwis have generally remained loyal throughout the recent months. For instance, when calls for demonstrations in the kingdom were issued, most Sahwi religious figures came out to denounce them. Some even went so far as to explain that demonstrations were not a legitimate means of asking for change. Aware of the Sahwa’s crucial importance, the state has also done all it could to reinforce the relationship: In the $100 billion aid package announced by King Abdullah, there is money for religious institutions, including some known to be Sahwa strongholds.

This does not necessarily mean that there is no potential for protest, however. The Sahwa’s history shows that it behaves as a strategic actor. For instance, in the early 1990s, in the wake of the Gulf War, when Islamist figures launched an opposition campaign against the regime, the Sahwa first supported the movement because it thought it could succeed -- before eventually withdrawing its support when understanding the risks. This means that in the future, if the Sahwa sees clearly favorable opportunities, it may decide to switch sides and support a protest.

There are already signs that some in the Sahwa may be willing to adopt a more critical posture. Late February, for instance, came out a petition called “Towards a State of Rights and Institutions” asking for democratic change (though expressed in a very conservative language) and signed by a few notable figures associated with the Sahwa, including Salman al-Awda. Also, in late April, a number of other key Sahwa figures, including Nasir al-Umar, signed a text calling for the release of or a fair trial for the country’s thousands of “political prisoners,” many of whom were arrested on terrorism charges after 2003.

Despite these relatively isolated moves, however, it is unlikely that in the current context the Sahwa would be willing to sacrifice its relations with the regime. There is potential for Islamist protest in Saudi Arabia, but not in the near term. And without the Islamists’ participation, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will be the scene of the kinds of sustained mobilization that have rocked much of the rest of the Arab world.

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Saudi Arabia’s Shiite problem

By Toby Matthiesen, March 7, 2012

At least seven young Shiite Muslims have been shot dead and several dozen wounded by security forces in Eastern Saudi Arabia in recent months. While details of the shootings remain unclear, and the ministry of interior claims those shot were attacking the security forces, mass protests have followed the funerals of the deceased. These events are only the latest developments in the decades-long struggle of the Saudi Shiites, which has taken on a new urgency in the context of 2011’s regional uprisings -- but have been largely ignored by mainstream media.

The events of the Arab Spring have heightened long-standing tensions in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province. Just three days after large-scale protests started in Bahrain on February 14, 2011, protests began in the Eastern Province, which is a 30-minute drive across the causeway from Bahrain. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Saudi interior ministry vowed to crush the protests with an “Iron Fist” and has unleashed a media-smear campaign against protests and the Shiites in general. While protests subsided over the summer, they started again in October and have become larger ever since, leading to an ever more heavy-handed response from the security forces.

This repressive response, with distinct rhetorical echoes of Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian regime, poses an awkward challenge to recent Saudi foreign policy. The protests of the people in the Eastern Province are as legitimate as the protests in Syria. If Saudi Arabia does not respond to these calls for reform at home how can it seriously claim to rise to the defense of democracy in Syria? The crackdown in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain has given the Iranian and Syrian regime, as well as Shiite political movements in Lebanon and Iraq, a useful rhetorical gambit to push back against their regional rivals.

The Eastern Province is home to virtually all of Saudi Arabia’s oil and to a sizeable Shiite minority, estimated at between one and a half and two million people or around 10 percent of Saudi Arabia’s citizen population. The Wahhabi creed of Sunni Islam that the state sponsors in Saudi Arabia has developed a special hostility toward the Shiites. Saudi Shiite citizens in turn have long complained of discrimination in religious practice, government employment, and business, and overall marginalization.

For decades, opposition groups formed by Saudi Shiites, both leftist and Islamists, as well as hundreds of petitions by Shiite notables, have had the same demands: an end to sectarian discrimination in government employment and representation in main state sectors including at the ministerial level; more development in Shiite areas; the strengthening of the Shiite judiciary; and an end to arbitrary arrests of Shiite for religious or political reasons. None of these demands would significantly undermine the position of the royal family, or otherwise threaten the integrity of Saudi Arabia. They would rather cement the current political system and buy the allegiance of two million people living on top of the kingdom’s oil.

Since last year, the demands have also included the release or retrial of nine Shiite political prisoners and a withdrawal of Saudi forces from Bahrain, or at least a negotiated solution to the conflict there, as well as more general political reforms in Saudi Arabia. The government promised youth activists that their grievances would be addressed in April 2011, so following a call from senior Saudi Shiite clerics to halt protests, they did so. But the government did not follow through, and answered with repression over the summer, even though it released some prisoners that were arrested during the February to April 2011 protests. Therefore, the situation remained tense, and when four Shiites were shot dead in November their funerals turned into anti-government rallies with up to a 100,000 participants.

The perception of systematic discrimination has led some Saudi Shiites to embrace revolutionary ideologies.
over the decades. While pro-Iranian groups still exist amongst Gulf Shiites, they are not the most powerful amongst Saudi Shiites and had largely renounced violence as a political tool since at least the mid-1990s. But Saudi Arabia’s repressive response to the protests and the zero-concessions policy are providing fertile breeding ground for future opposition groups. A repetition of post-1979 Shiite politics, when hundreds of young Shiites left Bahrain and Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province to become active in regional revolutionary movements, seems possible.

As the protests in Bahrain and particularly in Qatif receive only limited attention on Gulf-owned channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, local Shiites are forced to watch the Iranian-sponsored Arabic-language Al Alam channel, Lebanese Hezbollah’s Al Manar, Iraq’s Ahlul Bait TV, or increasingly other pro-Assad channels to receive updates on the situation in their areas. The new cold war in the Middle East has turned into a fully-fledged media war, in which media outlets are either with the protests in Bahrain and Qatif and for Assad’s regime, or with the protests in Syria and against the allegedly sectarian protests in Bahrain and Qatif.

The situation for Saudi Shiites in the Eastern Province is no secret. The U.S. State Department’s Annual Report to Congress on International Religious Freedom for the second half of 2010, the period immediately predating the Arab Spring, records arbitrary detentions, mosque closures, and the arrest of Shiite worshippers. U.S. diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks revealed that U.S. diplomats, and particularly the staff at its consulate in Dhahran, have an incredible amount of information on the local Shiite communities and seem almost obsessed with grievances they deem legitimate. But the specific problems of the Saudi Shiites almost never come up at high-level meetings with Saudi officials.

This is not only due to the close Saudi and U.S. alliance. Americans sometimes share the suspicion of the Gulf Shiites, which permeates some of its allied regimes. This suspicion is partly to do with Iran, but also has its roots in the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers, which killed 19 U.S. servicemen. Nine Shiite prisoners have been incarcerated since 1996 for their alleged membership in Hezbollah al-Hijaz and their involvement in the bombings. They were indicted in the United States in 2001, but as U.S. foreign policy priorities changed after September 11 they became “forgotten,” the name they are known by amongst Saudi Shiites. The indictment hints at the involvement of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran but no evidence has ever been made public. At the time some Americans called for retaliation against Iran as a response to this bombing. But after September 11, fingers began to point toward al-Qaeda as involved in the attack, raising questions about the guilt of these prisoners.

The secrecy surrounding this issue has contributed to mistrust toward the state and suspicion on parts of family members of the detained and the wider Saudi Shiite communities. Saudi Shiite protesters this year have adopted the cause of the nine prisoners. Their pictures were held up at rallies demanding their release, where their family members played a significant role. They were the Shiite counterparts of a simultaneous protest campaign in front of the ministry of interior in Riyadh by family members of political prisoners arrested on suspicion of membership in al-Qaeda. But contrary to those prisoners, the Shiite prisoners cannot hope ever to be “rehabilitated” in one of the government’s much advertised de-radicalization programs. It seems to be justified to at least ask for a public trial, a move repeatedly endorsed by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. But such a trial does not appear to be on the foreign-policy agenda of the United States.

The behavior of the Saudi leadership only allows the conclusion that repression of the Shiites is a fundamental part of Saudi political legitimacy. The state does not want to change the position of the Shiites and Shiite protests are used by the state to frighten the Sunni population of an Iranian takeover of the oilfields with the help of local Shiites. Similar narratives have been propagated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) media for months, at the cost of further deepening the sectarian divide in the Gulf States. The GCC intervention in Bahrain has
severely worsened sectarian relations in the Gulf and beyond to levels not seen since the Iranian Revolution. But this open Saudi sectarianism has already had negative repercussions in Iraq, as well as in Syria, Lebanon, and Kuwait. Bahrain looks set for years of sectarian conflict, community relations have broken down completely, and the state is conducting a campaign of what Shiite activists call “ethnic cleansing.” Rather than completely alienating the Shiites, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain should negotiate a social contract with them. Failing to do so will lead to years of instability with uncertain outcomes. And it is far from certain that other Saudis will not be encouraged by the Shiite protests, as a recent statement by liberal Saudis from all over the kingdom denouncing the crackdown in Qatif has shown.

The West should press its allies, above all Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, to stop simply shooting and arresting their Shiite citizens and brandishing them as Iranian agents and traitors. The alienation of Shiite youth foments a perfect breeding ground for a new Gulf Shiite opposition movement and plays into the hands of the Iranian regime. Even without external help for the local Shiite protesters, the area looks ripe for a return to the tense sectarian politics of the 1980s. The United States should in its own, and in the Gulf States’ interest push for a real reconciliation between the Shiites of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and their governments. Otherwise, sectarianism will come to dominate the Gulf, to the detriment of all.

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Oman, kind of not quiet?

By Ra’id Zuhair Al-Jamali, November 7, 2011

Oman held parliamentary elections on October 15 -- two weeks before the Tunisian elections that captured the world’s attention. But nobody paid them much mind. And why should they? There is not much more to be said beyond the high “participation” rate (76 percent of those who bothered to register), the solitude that the one elected woman may feel among her 83 male colleagues, or the election of three protesters. Tribal alliances still drove results in a country where political parties are not allowed and where, for most seats, 1,500 votes is enough to get elected.

But this might be deceiving. This has been Oman’s least quiet year in a generation. The Economist scored Oman sixth highest within its (unsophisticated) Arab instability index in early February, a forecast met with wide incredulity at the time. A few weeks later, the country was shaken with memorable scenes of unrest: protests -- some violent, most peaceful, loyalty marches, regime concessions, a GCC “Marshall Plan,” labor strikes and opportunistic demands, and regime crackdowns. The ground has significantly shifted beneath the feet of a regime that has overseen the rapid transformation of society over the last 40 years, underwritten by absolute power and facilitated by oil income.

Muscat witnessed its first significant demonstration only three days after Ben Ali fled Tunisia. By the second “Green March” -- on that first Friday sans Mubarak - it was undeniable that a new wind was blowing. Vibrancy of Bahrain’s early Lulu scenes and the intensifying youth-led protests in Yemen only sharpened the palpable
mood for change. Secure in its own rhetoric of Omani exceptionalism, the government chose not to confront crowds numbering in the low hundreds rallying mainly against corruption.

One week later, though, massive protests struck in the rapidly industrializing city of Sohar, setting in motion a month of unprecedented countrywide unrest, government concessions, labor opportunism, and even promises of GCC economic support. By mid March, however, specters of a bloody crackdown in Bahrain and Yemen fed fears of deterioration. On March 29, the army finally moved to clear the protests in Sohar, restoring safe passage for the industrial port area. Over the next month, order was gradually enforced through security and legal channels, culminating in the May 12 breakup of the last major protest site in Salalah. Whatever residual will for public manifestation there remained, summer heat soon dissolved.

Yet roots of the Omani protests extend deeper than a simple imitation of the prevailing Arab mood. Throughout the past decade, new and unregulated channels for disseminating information and expressing opinion proliferated. Internet forums dynamically altered the hitherto rigid political mood. With over 100,000 members and 200,000 daily visitors, thorny samizdat Al-Sablah endured episodes of closure and litigation until Oman’s own “Spring” forced a major concession -- the royal court now operates an official account. This and other examples of compelled accommodation illustrate how much the regime’s capacity for containment was challenged -- most dramatically since the defeat of the 1970’s Marxist insurgency led by the Popular Front for Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG). Yet this year’s confrontation was less ideological, more pragmatic. It’s about a youthful, worldly, more connected population who basically want a voice -- publicly accountable ministers, free and independent press, even separation of state powers. It’s also about an economy in which during 2009, nearly 75 percent of private sector jobs drew monthly wages of OMR 200 or less (USD $520), and in which non-nationals in the active workforce outnumbered nationals by more than two-to-one. Oil income may be near historic highs, but with the inequitable distribution of revenue, it’s far from enough to pamper the entire population. Even narrowing it to “jobs and economy” entails a political undercurrent: a limit of rentier social contract is fast approaching.

Cognizant of the situation’s unfolding gravity, the Omani authorities responded by bombarding the population with far-reaching decisions. One third of the Cabinet of Ministers was replaced. Some top officials, previously thought as immovable, were dismissed. There was an immediate creation of 50,000 jobs -- in a country where the total active national workforce, public and private, was probably 300,000. Minimum wage was raised by a one third (OMR 150 to 200). It did look quite ad hoc, even if the careful sequence of changes -- individually or in aggregate -- indicates that Oman had intellectually digested the risks and opportunities presented by its own youth bulge phenomenon.

But the treatment did not just stop at analgesics. Public prosecution gained independence from the police force and there was an expanded remit for State Audit committee. Constitutional changes were announced, with the bicameral house eventually gaining legislative and regulatory powers. These are actually deep institutional changes which are remodeling the scope of possibilities. Power is becoming more inclusive, with the elected Shura Council being granted extra voice and, while in the appointed State Council, civil society being recognized as the emergent social force.

The thing that is less clear is whether the Omani system can manage this adaptation. The regime is quite set in its ways. Many of the key figures are septuagenarians (or were, until March, when the average age of ministers significantly decreased). Since the resignation of his uncle nearly 40 years ago, Sultan Qaboos has not warmed up to the idea of a prime minister. The Sultan retains nominal ministership of defense, foreign affairs, finance, plus command of various military and security apparatuses. (With March’s cabinet sackings, the lightening rods had vanished and
it was expected that a PM was needed more than ever. Yet that still hasn’t happened.) Considering the widely acknowledged need for a more reactive, flexible form of governance, what type of power transfer can thus be expected? Moreover, as placements of individuals to public positions often proceed without their foreknowledge, this unpredictable all-powerful agency maintains a sense of public passivity. And of course: whenever a singular, i.e. extra-ordinary, power becomes the defining factor for an entire system, perennial uncertainty breeds.

Many Omanis worry as well about the regime’s efforts to re-impose control over the public sphere by drawing new “red lines.” For example, the amended penal code article headed “on undermining the state’s position” outlines punishment for those who undermine “prestige of the state” or weaken confidence in its financial reputation. Or another article in the press and publications law that prohibits “disseminating all that would compromise state security, internal or external.” Not to mention the ongoing appeal by Azzaman newspaper, slapped with prison sentences and one month closure.

Previous Omani reforms have typically responded to major external challenges. The Shura council was founded at the end of a year of intense world scrutiny bearing upon Saudi Arabia and the GCC consequent to Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Female inclusion could be seen as another proactive move, partially to stem the spread of Islamist currents of the 1990s. Post 9/11, a different set of acute outside pressures resulted in further overtures, proactive and reactive: non-opposition of benign Western reform agendas, symbolism of a 100-fold increase in base of possible voters in 2003 versus 1991, acquiescence to a regionally assertive United States on free trade. As these external pressures subsided, so did the reforms. The events of 2011 are a departure from the past as the first sustained, significant pressure from within. It remains unclear whether genuine pluralism can evolve within a domineering power structure, and more critically whether a democratic transition can be managed whilst preparing society for the post-oil terra incognita. At least if the exceptional number of Royal Decrees is any indicator, clearly some kind of shift is taking place.

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Jordan is not about to collapse

By Nicholas Seeley, November 14, 2012

If one is to believe what’s in the papers, it’s a bad year for Jordan. It’s got a violent civil war going on in its northern neighbor, which has sent more than 100,000 refugees fleeing over the border, and constantly threatens more spillover. Internally, it’s facing a massive budget crisis, and its two-year-old, Arab Spring-inspired political protest movement just won’t seem to go away.

In the past few months, I’ve read a dozen or more news articles and think tank reports that claim, with greater or lesser degrees of hysteria, that Jordan is finished. If King Abdullah II does not bow to the will of the protesters in the streets, and implement reforms that are less cosmetic than those of the past two years, it’s all over. The regime will fall, the country will be destabilized and either “collapse” or “explode,” or be taken over by Jihadi Islamist Fanatics, the Muslim Brotherhood, or people from a scary alternate universe in which the Muslim Brotherhood are Jihadi Islamist Fanatics.

Certainly, this week’s widespread and fairly aggressive protests over fuel-price hikes are worrisome, and not a good sign for Jordan, or the regime. But, to callously equate life to sci-fi TV: all of this has happened before, and all of this will very likely happen again. Seen from within, Jordan seems extremely unlikely to fall, explode, crumble, or collapse. It is not Somalia, or Yemen: it is a middle-income country with substantial state legitimacy, large bureaucratic institutions, and a strong military apparatus. Such countries do not crumble like sand castles when a wave hits. Negative development is possible, but it takes time - - and usually a lot of waves. Nor is it Iraq, Syria, or Yemen, where the state has spent years establishing massive, coercive violence as a social norm. Jordan is unique, and actually has a lot going for it.

Jordanian Advantage #1: Bureaucracy. The kingdom’s vast apparatus of state institutions may be unpopular at the moment, but that very unpopularity is a sign that it is legitimate. People are, for better or for worse, invested in it functioning. Jordanians interact with the state regularly and extensively; they depend on the government for jobs, for education, for medical care, for subsidized goods, for roads and street cleaning, electricity and municipal water, and all sorts of other things.

Perhaps the most important of those services is education. Jordan is a country with vast economic aspirations, which has spent a decade trying to catapult itself into first-world status. The educational system has quality issues that have stymied that aspiration, but the state has been very successful at making sure everyone goes at least to grade school. Not only is primary education valued and seen as a gateway to a better life, but it also exposes nearly every citizen in a fairly aggressive national identity-building project. The point is, Jordanians have lots of positive interactions with their government, which leads directly to Advantage #2: Decent Policing.

The Jordanians’ police show up to record car accidents. They investigate petty crimes, arrest drug dealers, and on balance deliver more security than violence. Sure, they are resented in many poor and marginalized communities, including in urban Palestinian camps and rural tribal enclaves -- but they are not wildly unpopular. One big factor is that the police are not the sharp end of a state repression project. Jordan can be described as authoritarian, but it has never relied on the kind of omnipresent state violence that characterized Iraq, Syria, Libya, or even Egypt. There are reports of dissidents being beaten and abused in Jordanian prisons, but they are a far cry from the widespread detentions, torture, and “disappearances” in which other Arab regimes have indulged. Jordan’s security state prefers to act through intimidation and subtle coercion, or buying loyalty with patronage and handouts.

Jordanian Advantage #3: An Organized Opposition. Perhaps mirroring the state’s preference for soft security, Jordan’s major opposition political actors are determinedly
nonviolent. In early October, the Muslim Brotherhood’s political wing organized a huge protest: organizers hoped for 50,000 participants. Regime loyalists had planned a counter-protest at the same location, and the conventional wisdom was that the country was going to explode right there. Instead, the state asked the counter-protesters to cancel their march, the organizers complied, and the Muslim Brotherhood proceeded with a protest so non-threatening it bordered on soporific.

Everything from slogans to marching formation was relentlessly organized, and very safe. Participants stood in neat lines, while organizers walked among them making sure they stood several feet apart, so the group looked bigger. On every flank of the protesters were groups of women in hijab and abaya: anyone who tried to start a confrontation, police or counter-protesters or thugs, would find themselves facing off against mothers, children, and grannies. The young male protesters were kept in the center, away from provocation. They mingled with families, painted faces, and filmed things on their cellphones; nowhere was there even a whiff of #MuslimRage.

In a recent interview, one of the leaders of the Brotherhood’s political party, Nimer Al-Assaf, said that state security had actually been trying to provoke the protest movement into acts of violence, and protesters had to be very clear that they were not going to take the bait. Which leads to Advantage #4: Security. Jordan has been peaceful and stable long enough to get used to the idea, and while people want more freedom, it is unlikely that large numbers will accept security disruptions to get it. Remember the example of Osama Bin Laden, who had approval ratings between 50 and 60 percent among Jordanians, until al Qaeda’s Iraq affiliate set off three human-carried suicide bombs in the capital, and Bin Laden’s popularity plummeted. Any protest movement that seriously appears to endanger public security would risk immediate irrelevance and backlash. (Even during today’s relatively standard austerity-protest riots, featuring tear gas and stone throwing, there were signs the political movements were distancing themselves from the violence rather than doubling down.)

People who predict a Jordanian collapse usually do so in generalities, perhaps because trying to figure out how it would happen, day-by-day, raises such a large number of alternatives. Let’s look at a few.

Scenario #1: Violent spillover from Syria. This is often raised as something that could destabilize Jordan -- but to do so, the violence would have to be so extensive that Jordan’s Armed Forces would be incapable of containing it. I doubt Syria could manage that with much less than a full-on invasion. In such an unlikely and extreme case, it is then impossible to imagine that Jordan’s allies, including the United States and Saudi Arabia, would not send tanks, advisors, and money to shore up the walls. Also, refer to advantage #4: any external stress seems more likely to cause Jordanians to rally ‘round the flag than to divide and start fighting. Some analysts have worried about Syria’s sectarian civil war getting regionalized -- and in Iraq and Lebanon this seems to be happening. But Jordan’s communal divisions, which center around national identity, and the competition between East Bank Jordanians and Jordanian Palestinians, are completely different from Syria’s; the sectarian war there would have trouble taking hold in entirely Sunni Jordan.

Scenario #2: Economic Collapse. Jordan’s bloated budget is a serious worry -- the kingdom needs cash -- and drawing down subsidies on fuel is tremendously unpopular, as demonstrated in the last two days. Government largesse will have to diminish, or the country could face broader economic problems, but lowering salaries or eliminating government jobs will swell the ranks of the discontented. However, the regime has developed ways of serving up
bitter pills: trying out price increases and then rolling them back when the popular pressure is too much, sacrificing governments to appease popular discontent. Jordan has rolled back subsidies before, and survived.

But imagine that this time the tricks don't work and the protests just won't die off -- Jordan's government could wind up with its back to the fiscal cliff. But if maintaining deficit spending a bit longer is what it takes to prevent a protest surge, the kingdom's foreign allies offer it a large credit line. The United States and the Gulf monarchies do not want to be cast as long-term backers of Jordan's welfare state, but they have too much invested in Jordan to risk letting it sail off the edge. If an economic reckoning day does come, there will be a loan from somewhere that lets Jordan keep the lights on for another month, or another quarter -- long enough to find a solution, or at least a delaying tactic.

Scenario #3: Jordan's protest movement “blows up.” It's true that the vehemence of this week's demonstrations has been worrying. But it's still hard to picture them getting out of hand in a way that could lead to state collapse. Particularly with Jordan's population still divided over the protest movement's validity, demonstrations that embrace violence or call for the downfall of the regime are more likely to be self-delegitimizing than inflammatory. It's entirely believable that the state can simply continue with its time-tested tactic of rounding up the most extreme, sweating them in jail for a while, and sending them home with a reminder that getting too radical isn't good for their job prospects, or their children's education.

Yes, but couldn't some incident send the whole thing spiraling out of hand? Possibly, but it's highly unlikely there will be an incident severe enough to do so. Recall: the Syrian protests got out of hand when the regime tortured a group of teenagers in Daraa. Now remember Advantage #2: Jordan's government is autocratic, not psychotic, and smart enough to learn from its neighbors’ mistakes. The idea of the Jordanian security services torturing children or opening fire on protesters is, I believe, genuinely unthinkable.

Of course, there are spoilers on many sides: individuals or ungoverned groups that might do something beyond the pale. And the most vehement protest rhetoric at the moment is coming out of semi-rural, tribal East-Banker communities. It's possible that a protest in the town of Tafileh could get out of control in a way that a Brotherhood-organized protest in Amman simply wouldn't. But the Jordanian government has decades of experience resolving tribal disputes. Every year, at least, some Jordanian city will see destructive clashes between rival tribes or, more spectacularly, between tribes and the police. Yet these outbreaks are always swiftly resolved: after a day or two of burning tires in the street, the government brings in high ranking tribal figures, even members of the royal family, and brokers a truce over cups of Arabic coffee. The lesson to take from this is not that Jordan is a violent place, but that Jordan has both state and non-state institutions that are very, very experienced at mediating and defusing violence when it happens.

In a last resort, Jordan's military would impose martial law, as it has done successfully in previous crises. That, too, might stir more popular resentment than in the past -- but enough of the community would back it that defying it would be costly.

I could go on like this, but perhaps that's enough. I would be fascinated to see anyone lay out, point-by-point and event-by-event, the trajectory that they believe could lead Jordan to a major state collapse or significant regime change. But I can't imagine one. Or perhaps I will be wrong -- in which case I will get to see firsthand.

None of this is to say that there are easy solutions to Jordan's problems. There are plenty of bad outcomes that do not equal collapse. I have no trouble imagining Jordan limping on as-is more or less indefinitely, with an economy lurching from one fiscal crisis to the next; a crippled, puppet government acting as little more than a foil for the palace; and an angry opposition movement, its fortunes waxing and waning in the streets, but lacking the leverage to force reforms on the state without alienating the street. All to the accompaniment of a long series of security
“incidents” and distraction tactics, of soft repression alternating with cosmetic reform and bogus perestroika. We do not like to think about scenarios like these; they do not feel like “outcomes.” But they seem much more likely than clear and cataclysmic resolutions.

No, it can’t go on forever. Enough living like this would slowly erode all those nice advantages. Jordanians would have fewer positive interactions with their government, black markets and underground services would replace state ones, and repression would have to get harsher.

People would feel less secure, and be less willing to trade away freedom for security. Give Jordan 10, 20 years like that, and perhaps it will truly be ready to fall. But not today. By denying the people’s desire for reform, the regime may be selling off Jordan’s future as the economically thriving, developed nation it would like to be -- but not critically endangering its present.

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A Moroccan monarchical exception?

By Mohamed Daadaoui, December 14, 2012

Almost two years into the so-called “Arab spring,” the record of revolutionary success is mixed. Whereas Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya are engaged in their own post-revolutionary institutional experiments, Syria has descended into civil war, in a sure sign that the outcome will irrevocably undermine the Assad regime. In the midst of all of the revolutionary tumult, monarchical regimes, in the Gulf, Jordan, and Morocco, have for the most part withstood the tempest of the protests. This imposes imminent theoretical and empirical questions about the variation in the outcome of the Arab revolt.

So far, monarchicalies have been the exception and far from engaging in semantic exercises, this regime-type is indeed an empirical reality pointing to what I call an “advantage” that they possess over republican states in the Middle East and North Africa. After all, the Arab authoritarian states all used, in one way or another, similar strategies from the same menu of autocratic manipulation to deal with their respective uprisings.

The Maghreb’s only monarchy in Morocco proved more resilient than many had expected, and has largely outlasted and outmaneuvered the beleaguered February 20 movement. In addition to institutional manipulation and vastly cosmetic changes, monarchicalies possess an advantage over republican authoritarian states. In fact, while many may speak of a crisis of authoritarianism, we can perhaps identify a “republican” authoritarian crisis and a monarchical advantage.

This advantage is traced back to the colonial period when European colonial masters established most of the republican states arbitrarily. Monarchicalies like Morocco, on the other hand, feature a different state-regime relationship as remnants of political orders pre-existed the edifice of the modern state constructed by either French or British colonialism. Current regimes have managed to surround existing regime coalitions with modern states as a byproduct of colonial legacies, as is the case in Jordan and the Gulf states.
This “advantage” in its religious and traditional guise, and the resulting manipulation of its symbols of power facilitates the authoritarian rule in most of Arab monarchies. In Jordan, the mixture of tribal manipulation, and courting of the Hashemite lineage of the monarchy have been crucial in facilitating the regime’s grip on power. In Gulf sheikhdoms, tribal and clan relationships sustain the authority of oil-rich monarchs, in addition to the distribution of patronage. In Morocco, the French colonial project strengthened monarchical rule as it subdued former lawless territories outside the dominance of the monarch to a centralized modern state that grew more autocratic after independence in 1956.

Regime stability in Morocco has relied on the interplay between symbolic, historical, and coercive means subsumed under the authority of the Makhzen apparatus of the state. The state in Morocco is in many ways an authority in which two systems, rational-temporal and symbolic-religious, coexist in the face of modern challenges to regime stability. The modern Makhzen, initially buttressed by French colonial state modernization has of course adapted new constitutional and administrative structures while retaining its historical, symbolic rigor and authority. In fact, what the French created was a giant leviathan with its tentacles in the spiritual/traditional and the modern/temporal realms of power.

The duality of the monarchy as a modern and traditional authority thus created through colonial rule is difficult to challenge by any other opposition discourse and has made for a robust edifice for authoritarian rule based on patronage and specific institutionalized rituals of powers. The modern manifestations of old traditions of power create a culture of dissonance conducive to monarchical supremacy. The monarch’s spiritual hegemony in turn frustrates the opposition’s attempts to challenge the legitimacy of the regime.

The symbolic, traditional, tribal, or religious capital associated with monarchical regimes subsumes all other features of authoritarian rule. Morocco’s strategy toward the February 20 movement is instructive in this case. Relying on his socio-cultural capital, King Mohammed VI managed to slow the momentum of the February 20 protest movement, by offering a semblance of reforms. Thus in a nationally televised speech, the king pledged constitutional and political reforms. He stated his “firm commitment to giving a strong impetus to the dynamic and deep reforms ... taking place.” Days later, Mohammed VI established a blue ribbon royal commission entrusted with the task of proposing a new constitution which was unveiled and endorsed by the monarch in June 2011. The new constitution, hailed as a milestone in the process of democratic reforms in Morocco, was met with wider criticism from the vastly outmatched opposition and the February 20 movement.

The new constitution was later approved, after the royal endorsement, in a national referendum by an overwhelming majority of 98 percent of the votes. The new constitution consecrated the king’s religious capital, despite removal of any references to the sacredness of the personality of the king. The sovereign is still inviolable as “king, commander of the faithful (amir al-mu’minin)” and “head of state, and symbol of national unity.” Despite the constitutional changes, the monarchy holds significant clout in the political system with control over the military and economy, and retains vast discretionary powers. The impacts of the February 20 protest movement of have been limited due to the colossal popular support for the monarchy in Moroccan society stemming from its tremendous religious and traditional capital.

Monarchical control over the realm of the religious and traditional is manifested through the use of regime rituals of power, which have been codified and institutionalized in the body of law, constitution, and political system in Morocco. The coup de grace for the protest movement was the legislative elections of November 2011, which saw the plurality victory of the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) and the appointment of its head Abdelilah Benkirane as prime minister. Many were hopeful that the electoral victory of the former opposition and Islamist party would be a prelude to meaningful political
and economic reforms. Such hopes were quickly dashed as the work of the government continues to be undermined by the palace’s own shadow government of personal advisors.

Thus, Morocco’s monarchical regime is confident these days. In fact, it is so confident that it has launched the last phase of its strategy toward the February 20 movement. Instead of placating the protests, recent demonstrations witnessed outright state oppression as scores of protesters were injured while lamenting the increasingly dire socio-economic conditions. The poverty rate exceeds 20 percent, and unemployment is around 30 percent among people under 34 years old. The situation has worsened due to this year’s chronic drought, a drop in tourism, and the economic recession in Europe (Morocco’s leading trade partner). The protests also came amidst the governing JDP’s controversial decision to launch fiscal reforms of the state’s subsidy system. Benkirane’s government also unveiled a 20 percent increase in fuel prices, which angered many in the streets, already reeling from high levels of inflation and increased cost of living.

Whether it is a state of exceptionalism, an anomaly, or a temporary advantage, Morocco’s monarchy seems to have so far carefully navigated the first salvo of the Arab street unrest. In addition to institutional, and socio-economic manipulations, Morocco’s king and other monarchies possess a traditional, tribal, or religious advantage that may well have made the difference in their survival thus far. In the case of Morocco, as long as opposition forces are unable to demystify the monarchy of its religious hegemony, real progress will always remain elusive. At the same time, monarchy’s dual policy of promoting fictitious reforms, while at the same time oppressing individual liberties, and plundering the state’s economic resources, could gradually, and over the long term, erode its regime “advantage” especially as it is increasingly seen as an agent of paralysis.

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