

Democratization in the Arab World?

EMIRS AND PARLIAMENTS IN THE GULF

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Talk of democracy in the states of the Persian Gulf often inspires skepticism. There is, first and foremost, the anxiety that even modest moves toward democracy will lead to their Talibanization. But fears that an Islamist takeover will result from a partial transition are exaggerated. As much as the sad experience of Algeria shows the very real dangers of ill-considered attempts at democratization, it is unlikely in the extreme that an Algerian scenario will play out in the Gulf: The ruling families there are too deeply ensconced to be ousted by Islamists. In each country, the ruling family holds a monopoly on the cabinet portfolios of defense, interior, and foreign affairs (the “ministries of sovereignty,” as they are called), along with numerous other posts—all of which afford the dynasties tremendous political security. To be sure, the intrafamilial diffusion of power that results can and does lead to disputes within the dynasties, but because each also has effective mechanisms for internal dispute resolution, they remain durable.¹

The resilience of the Gulf autocracies makes full democratization a distant prospect, but there is a silver lining of sorts to this: Monarchical stability lowers the risks of partial democratization in the form of free elections for a parliament of limited authority. Among the Gulf states, only Kuwait has extensive experience with such a legislature, its parliament having sat in most years since 1963. Nor can this parliament be dismissed as mere window dressing or as a token of liberalization without democratization. Elections matter in Kuwait. Its parliament has substantial legislative powers and more influence still in setting the public agenda, although only limited control over the cabinet. And other states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman—are moving in the same direction. Parliamentary elections are scheduled

for October 2002 in Bahrain, and for sometime in 2003 in Qatar. Oman's Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) is already elected, though under restrictive conditions that ensure results amenable to the government.

Islamists form the single largest political tendency in the Kuwaiti parliament, and they swept the May 2002 local elections in Bahrain. The Kuwaiti National Assembly is best known in the West for its 1999 rejection of the emir's proposal to allow women to vote. Islamist illiberality on other issues should not be underestimated or glossed over. On issues related to religion or to the role of women, the ruling families are still generally more liberal than many of those who are—or might be—elected to parliament. All of this prompts further skepticism about parliaments, and gives grounds to wonder if there is a serious disconnect between democracy and liberalism in the Gulf: Modestly democratic parliaments generate a good deal of illiberal policy.

On balance, however, parliamentary life does more good than harm. Kuwait's system of government is far more transparent than that of, say, Saudi Arabia. Citizens (or some of them) have a voice in how they are governed. Liberals and other non-Islamists have a public platform from which they can set out their views, something Saudi liberals lack. And, at least in these Gulf monarchies, parliamentary life does seem to promote some degree of moderation among Islamists. In Kuwait and Bahrain, they plainly benefit from liberal political freedoms—the alternative being ruling-family repression. For there to be free elections, there must be substantial freedom of the press, speech, assembly, and so forth, and Islamists recognize that they depend on these freedoms. This creates an arena for public debate in which Islamist ideas can be contested. Kuwaiti women are not free to vote, but they can publicly argue that they *ought* to be. And the most durable victory for women's suffrage will be achieved when most Kuwaitis are convinced, via public debate, that women should have full political rights. In a region where autocracy tends to clear civil society of all groups but Islamist ones, liberals and others in Kuwait are able to give voice to their ideas, form organizations, and contest elections.

Kuwait's Parliament

Any discussion of Gulf parliaments by necessity centers on the Kuwaiti National Assembly (only Bahrain has had any previous parliamentary experience, and it was short). Elections in Kuwait are free. The government did purchase some votes in the past two elections, in 1996 and 1999, but the results largely reflected voters' intentions.² At the same time, Kuwait has an unusual constitutional provision that gives all cabinet members seats in the unicameral parliament along with the right to vote on most issues. The cabinet can include up to 16 members (the Assembly has 50 elected members). Since only one of those must

be an elected member of parliament, the government enjoys a reliably loyal bloc of up to 15 additional voting MPs, some of whom belong to the ruling family, the Al Sabah. (Sheikhs of the Al Sabah never run for election.) Furthermore, the cabinet votes are supplemented by the votes of “service deputies,” a bloc within the parliament that reliably supports the government in exchange for constituent services. And yet, despite these advantages, the government does sometimes lose important votes, as was the case with parliament’s refusal to give women the vote.

The monarchical nature of the Kuwaiti regime shapes the likely path of any further democratization, which will not revolve around more or freer elections, but will instead require making the cabinet responsible to parliament rather than to the emir. Today Kuwait’s emir selects the prime minister—who is invariably also the crown prince—and the prime minister selects the other ministers in turn. The family allocates the ministries of sovereignty among its own members, while the remaining ministers are appointed following wide consultations with various groups and individuals throughout Kuwaiti society. While the ruling family determines the final formula, it does give serious attention to balancing the political forces in parliament. The resulting cabinet need not win an immediate vote of confidence from parliament, nor indeed does the 1962 Constitution provide for a vote of confidence in the government as a whole.³ Following a practice found in some older Western constitutions, however, the Kuwaiti Constitution allows for votes of confidence in *individual* ministers. Such a vote is preceded by an interpellation in which deputies formally question the minister (members of the cabinet do not vote on motions of confidence). On the request of at least ten deputies, the interpellation proceeds to a vote of confidence. If the minister loses the vote, he is dismissed.

Kuwait’s parliamentary system has seen a considerable degree of consolidation. Elections have become an accepted part of the country’s political life and, crucially, Kuwaitis have come to expect that they will be fairly conducted for the most part. An unconstitutional suspension of the parliament is less likely now than at any time in the past. Over time, the constituency for absolutism in Kuwaiti society has dwindled. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the ruling family gave citizenship (and the right to vote) to many tribal members in order to counterbalance the urban-nationalist and merchant opposition, although today the tribes are themselves more often in the opposition than they are with the government. The same holds true for two older sometime allies of the government, the Islamists and the Shi’ites.

Formidable obstacles nonetheless stand in the way of any further movement toward making the cabinet answer to parliament. First, the ruling family will not lightly give up its control of the ministries of sovereignty, nor is it likely to allow the parliament to decide which Al

Sabah sheikhs get which posts. These are core prerogatives of the family, tied directly to its internal balance of power and to its method of resolving internal disputes. Second, while there is a strong desire for more democracy in some quarters, the ruling family enjoys real legitimacy. Republicanism has no support in Kuwait, and the 1962 Constitution, which itself enjoys wide support, calls for a parliament but also grants the ruling family a major role in government.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to further democratization is the opposition's own lack of common purpose. Islamists and liberals agree that there ought to be a parliament, and they cooperated in demanding a resumption of parliamentary life after the suspension of the Assembly in 1986. But that is about the extent of their common program. They have certainly not cooperated much in recent years to further trim the power of the Al Sabah.

Recent Kuwaiti politics affords a sense of how the issue of further democratization gets lost in the political shuffle. In July 2002 a formidable parliamentary coalition of Islamists, Shi'ites, and tribal deputies interpellated the minister of finance, himself a respected liberal. The interpellation proceeded to a vote of confidence, and Sheikh Sabah, the acting prime minister, declared that the government would resign if the minister lost the vote. This raised the prospect that the crisis could turn into an opportunity to establish the principle that the cabinet as a whole could be brought down by a vote of the Assembly. But in the event, the political battle did not turn on the issue of further democratization. Instead, as the journalist Hamid al-Jasir of *Al-Hayat* put it, the interpellation brought three divisions to the fore: 1) the split between the competing wings of the ruling family; 2) the divide separating liberals and Islamists; and 3) the rift between "economic neo-liberals" and those defending the interests of the poor (which is also a distinction between the *hadar*—or city families—and the more recently settled tribes).⁴ The divide among the sheikhs of the Al Sabah is particularly important. The allocation of posts to members of the ruling family inevitably leaves some dissatisfied, and unhappy sheikhs have used parliamentary interpellations to attack governments and try to force redistributions of cabinet posts. This does not mean that the deputies are mere pawns of the sheikhs, but it does indicate why Kuwaiti politics is much more complicated than a straightforward battle between the autocratic monarchy and the democratic opposition.

Sheikh Sabah, the acting prime minister, has long had good relations with Kuwait's liberals. The nominal prime minister, Sheikh Saad, has health problems, and the emir asked Sheikh Sabah to form the current government in early 2001. In the recent crisis, liberals in the parliament rallied around Sheikh Sabah, their champion in the ruling family, putting them in an awkward position for a group that has long sought to trim the powers of the government. In the end, the finance minister narrowly

survived, drawing on votes from liberals, urban deputies, and reliably progovernment service deputies. But victory had a cost: Even the government's liberal supporters criticized it for shoveling largesse at wavering deputies. The government also backed down on some of its economic and administrative reform plans, which made up the core of its program. And the political system came to yet another paralyzing halt over issues that were seen to be as much about personalities as about issues. The combination of a fractious ruling family with parliamentary horse-trading gets in the way of coherent government and makes the Kuwaiti model less attractive to the rest of the region.⁵

One solution would be to let parliament form governments rather than merely attack them. But there are no signs that a move in this direction is imminent. Such a move would require that the prime minister's post be given up to someone from outside the family, though the ruling family might still reserve the ministries of sovereignty for its members. Further democratic development in Kuwait, if it occurs, will almost certainly be on a parliamentary model: No president will replace the emir. Parties operate informally, but they are weak. The current electoral system (25 small two-member districts) produces a parliament composed largely of independents, some associated with the government, others with liberal or Islamist political groups. A different electoral system could produce stronger parties, especially if they could form governments. But it is unlikely that even this would produce a party capable of forming a government without a coalition. The cleavages in Kuwaiti society are deep: between liberals and Islamists, Sunnis and Shi'ites, tribes and *hadar*. Of course, all of this may be to the good: The prospect of an electorally dominant Islamist party in a more democratic Kuwait, however unlikely, gives reason for pause.

Bahrain and Qatar

The new ruler of Bahrain—a tiny island country with about half a million citizens that sits between Qatar and the Saudi coast—recently launched an ambitious political opening, releasing political prisoners, inviting the opposition back from exile, reforming the security forces, and promising elections. All this marked a vast improvement over the situation in the 1990s, when the regime busied itself with brutally repressing its opposition. Bahrain's Shi'ite majority distinguishes it from Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, where Sunni ruling families preside over mostly Sunni citizens. The Sunni Al Khalifa family took over Bahrain in 1783 and has long treated the Shi'ites as a conquered people. Bahrain's divisive history has created a deep reservoir of ill will between the Al Khalifa and most of the populace. While the sectarian divide poses an obstacle to partial democratization not found in other GCC states, it is far too simple to blame Bahrain's past lack of success with

parliamentary life on the sectarian issue alone. Bahrain's previous experiment with a parliament, from 1973 to 1975, foundered not on the sectarian issue but because the ruling family grew exasperated at the legislature's refusal to agree to a restrictive law on public security. The main Shi'ite opposition group in the 1990s has been quite moderate,

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focusing its demands on the restoration of the 1973 Constitution and eschewing any demand that the ruling family be removed from power. Given the ruling family's iron grip on the almost wholly Sunni security and military forces, the country's Shi'ites have little other choice. The ruling family's brutal repression of the opposition in the 1990s was not necessary to avoid an Iranian-style revolution, but instead merely served the desire of the ruling family to

avoid any accountability to the subjects of their family fiefdom.

Bahrain modeled its 1973 Constitution closely on Kuwait's. In February 2002, the ruler revised this constitution by decree, further limiting the powers of parliament. The revisions created an appointive upper house and dropped the provision that calls for the cabinet as a whole to sit in the elected lower house. Disagreements between the elected lower house and the appointive upper house are to be resolved by a vote of all members of both houses in joint session. Since both houses will be the same size, with 40 members each, this gives elected deputies less power than they enjoyed under the 1973 Constitution, which called for a set of institutions closely resembling those found in Kuwait today. Only the lower house votes on interpellations and motions of confidence, but the vote succeeds only if two-thirds of the deputies vote against the minister. The opposition is unhappy about these unilateral changes to the constitution, but it is not clear that it would gain much by rejecting them and refusing to participate in the upcoming elections. It is primarily the attitude of the ruling family that will determine the fate of the current opening; the family will have to make the concessions necessary to keep the moderate opposition engaged. Opposition leaders, for their part, will need to balance their desire to keep the game going with their need to remain responsive to the demands of their constituents.

A draft of Qatar's new constitution was presented to the emir in July 2002. It calls for a unicameral legislature. Qataris—including women—will elect two-thirds of the members in direct and secret elections, while the emir will appoint the remaining members. The parliament will have the power to approve the budget, to interpellate ministers, and to vote them out of office through a vote of confidence. The constitution was drafted by a committee appointed by the emir, which took a very delib-

erate three years to complete its task. Qatar has already had local elections, in 1999, and observers commented positively on their fairness. Women were allowed to run as candidates and to vote, though none won a seat. The most marked difference between Qatar and both Bahrain and Kuwait lies in the absence, to this point, of a really vocal opposition. Qatari moves toward liberalization appear to be tactical concessions by the emir, who overthrew his father in 1995 and seems to have calculated that a slow process of liberalization, followed by the opening of a parliament, would help place his rule on a firmer basis.

Full parliamentary democracy in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain will not be achieved any time soon. But the parliamentary life that is underway in Kuwait, and on the way in Bahrain and Qatar, should not be dismissed lightly. Nor will partial democratization lead to an Islamist takeover. Today in Kuwait citizens have a real—if still constrained—voice in how they are governed, and even Islamists find they have a stake in defending the liberal freedoms that accompany parliamentary life. The presence of active parliaments can lay the foundation for further democratization, especially to the degree that a tradition of free elections continues. There are certainly real blemishes. Parliaments reflect the illiberal views of the Islamists elected to them. And the way in which Kuwait's parliament has become entangled in disputes within the ruling family contributes to a sense of political and societal drift. Yet Kuwait is also the freest of the Gulf states, and it has the most transparent government among them. Efforts to set up parliaments in the Gulf—especially in Bahrain—should be encouraged, as should their spread to other nearby states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

NOTES

1. See Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

2. On Kuwaiti politics see Mary Ann Tétreault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

3. An unused constitutional provision gives parliament the power to declare that it cannot work with the prime minister. Should this happen, the emir dismisses either the parliament or the cabinet.

4. *Al-Hayat* (London), 14 June 2002.

5. See, for example, Khalid al-Dukhail in *Al-Hayat* (London), 18 February 2001.