

dossier

Crisi e nuovi equilibri nel Golfo





Marina Ottaway

Arab Monarchies: the Challenge of Transformation

MARINA OTTAWAY is Senior Associate Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C.

Do monarchies enjoy a special advantage in surviving the waves of discontent and popular uprisings that cause the downfall of republican governments? The idea about the superior resilience of monarchical regimes has long enjoyed popularity in the Arab world, although it is based more on unsubstantiated assumptions than on solid evidence. Monarchies have not proven to be particularly resilient around the world, after all. Few European monarchies have survived, and those that have did so by surrendering executive functions to elected governments and accepting a role that is essentially ceremonial and symbolic, while real power and decision-making lie elsewhere.

Across the world monarchical systems are waning and republics are becoming the dominant form of political system. Nor is there any indication that monarchies are about to make a comeback. In many recent transitions, from Bulgaria to Afghanistan, descendants of the last king have made a feeble attempt to stage a return to political life, but so far no one has succeeded in reviving a dead monarchy.

Nevertheless, the idea that monarchies are more resilient than republics and more likely to survive political upheavals remains alive in the Arab world, bolstered by the assumptions that monarchs enjoy a high degree of legitimacy that allows them to introduce political reforms if need be without losing their hold on power. Whereas an authoritarian president that agrees to open up the political system is virtually certain to be voted out of power, an equally authoritarian king that opens up the political system to some degree is likely to see his legitimacy enhanced and popularity increased, thus retaining his throne.

The wave of uprisings that started in late 2010 offers an opportunity to test the theory that Arab monarchies are more likely to reform than republics and that they are thus more resilient. The theory at this point is failing the test. It is true that all eight Arab monarchies, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan and Morocco, have survived the first wave of popular uprisings in the region unscathed. But this is not because they have vigorously responded to popular demands with a reform program. On the contrary, most have not encountered a serious challenge so far. The exception is Bahrain, where the monarchy is under great pressure by the disaffected Shia population and a smaller number of Sunni activists, but Bahrain has responded to the continuing unrest with repression rather than reform.

The events of the last year suggest two conclusions to the question whether monarchical regimes are more resilient than republican ones. On the one hand, they show that, if a monarch decides to embark on a reform process, he can introduce significant change and still maintain the throne. Mohammed VI of Morocco responded to the first signs of unrest by pre-empting demands for change and announcing his own reform program: he ordered the drafting of a new constitution, submitted it to a referendum, and held new elections leading to the formation of a cabinet with a Muslim Brother as prime minister. The king managed to stop unrest and emerged from the potential crisis with much of his power intact and his legitimacy unchallenged. But Morocco is a lone outlier.

On the other hand, the response of other monarchical regimes shows that they simply do not want political reform. In Jordan, the king is at least talking about reform, but a year into the unrest he has yet to make any decisive moves. Other monarchs have done even less. The question whether Arab monarchs could keep themselves in power by engineering top down reform is thus moot. They probably could, but they do not appear sufficiently foresighted to take full advantage of their legitimacy.

Examining the Causes of Arab Unrest: the Monarchies' Interpretation

We will never know for sure why a wave of unrest spread through the Arab World in 2011. Events are clear enough, but the causes are not. The story has been told many times of how the self-immolation of a young fruit vendor in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia triggered a wave of demonstrations that quickly spread, catching the president by surprise and leading him to flee the country in a panic. Young Egyptians inspired by events in Tunisia also started organizing, with a degree of success that they themselves had not foreseen. The speed of the contagion is vividly reflected in the names of protest movements in various countries: January 25 in Egypt, February 14 in Bahrain and February 20 in Morocco.

The most common explanation is that the uprisings were caused by poverty and unemployment, but also by a quest for dignity and political participation. Both explanations are plausible, supported by statistical evidence about living conditions in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, evidence of political repression under the previous regimes, and anecdotal evidence from slogans, placards carried by demonstrators, and interviews. But there is no reliable socio-economic profile of the protesters, no evidence that the people who took to the

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streets were disproportionately poor and unemployed or conversely that most were on a quest for dignity.

An additional difficulty in explaining the uprisings is that all socio-economic and political problems that led to the unrest were chronic ones, which had been discussed for a long time. Indeed, the possibility of a popular explosion had been predicted for decades, but without materializing.

Egypt was deemed ready to explode any time already back in the 1980s, when this author lived there, and probably for a long time before. And the event that led a fruit seller in Sidi Bouzid to immolate himself, namely the confiscation of his merchandise by the police, is one that takes place constantly not only in Sidi Bouzid, but also in markets across the Arab world and in all countries where unlicensed sellers compete with licensed ones, who in turn appeal to the police to curb the problem.

The issue of why the uprisings took place is of interest not only to the historically-minded and to social scientists, but also to policy-makers who use the explanation of what happened to justify their response. Governments who use repression argue that the machinations of foreign elements caused the uprisings. Those that can afford to increase social spending argue that the root causes of the problem are poverty and unemployment. They all forget that there is no direct relationship between root causes and solutions: the restoration of stability in the countries affected by the uprising does not depend on solving the problems of poverty, unemployment, or human dignity, which in any case can only be solved over the long run. Rather it depends on finding an agreement among the political forces that arise in a period of upheaval and that must be accommodated in the subsequent arrangements, something most monarchies disregarded.

Monarchical regimes chose instead a narrow interpretation of the causes of unrest, because it was the least threatening to them. They focused on the economic grievances and chose to believe that poverty and unemployment were the root causes of the uprisings and thus that the unrest could be prevented by addressing those problems. Only two of the monarchies reacted differently, Morocco and Bahrain. In Morocco the king immediately understood that the solution to the problem was political and thus moved swiftly down the road of political reform. His new constitution was clearly an attempt to forge a new agreement with the country's major political forces; it was not negotiated, but engineered from the top, but it nevertheless represented an attempt to rally Moroccans behind a new agreement. Bahrain, on the other hand, attempted neither to introduce reform nor to buy off discontent. The uprising by the majority Shia population, not the first one in the country's history, was extremely threatening to the Sunni monarchy. It thus chose to believe that Shia grievances were not genuine but were the outcome of Iranian machinations. The outcome was a brutal

response, well-documented in the November 2011 report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, also known as the Bassiouni report from the name of the Commission's head, a respected Egyptian jurist appointed by the king to investigate the handling of the uprising in the hope of muting international criticism.

Most monarchs rejected political explanations of the unrest. They refused to consider the possibility that their citizens may not have been convinced about the superiority of monarchical systems. Nevertheless, the frequent protestations about the special links between monarchs and their people are unmistakable signs that most monarchs are not sure, ultimately, that they and their families enjoy as much legitimacy as they would like to believe.

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Analyzing the Response

The eight Arab countries with monarchical systems are very different from each other in terms of their size and wealth and composition of the population. Yet these differences played a very small role either in determining the severity of the unrest or at least the threat of unrest or the kind of response.

Small Countries with Complex Polities

Among Arab monarchies, only Morocco (32 million), Saudi Arabia (26 million including 5.5 million non-nationals), and Jordan (6.5 million) have a population size that requires complex political and administrative systems. The remaining Gulf countries are essentially city-states, with the United Arab Emirates being a federation of city-states. Thus, it is much easier to imagine a popular uprising to overthrow the monarchy or to transform it into a constitutional monarchy with a figurehead king in the three larger countries than elsewhere. Furthermore, some of the Gulf countries have a high percentage of foreign workers in their population, indeed a majority in Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, and this is bound to affect the political situation. For example in the UAE, where the total population of over 8 million includes fewer than 900.000 nationals, it is easier to envisage an uprising by foreigner workers demanding better treatment than an uprising by citizens demanding democracy.

In reality, there is no correlation between the size of the country and the incidence of protests. The countries that have experienced greatest unrest in the last



year are Bahrain and Kuwait, where the demographic factors and history led to constant turmoil or, in the case of Kuwait, political instability. Indeed, these two small countries are unlikely to ever settle down without significant changes in their political systems. Bahrain needs to renegotiate relations between the Shia majority and the Sunni monarchy, or it will continue to experience recurring flare-ups. The country went through a prolonged period of strife in the 1990s, which was settled to some extent by the new constitution of 2002 before flaring up again in 2011. The underlying problem is the struggle for equality by the Shia majority that has always been treated, and discriminated against, as a minority. This situation has led to a high level of mobilization among Shias but also has precluded the struggle to be extended to the entire population, because the Sunni minority is not interested in giving up its privileges and protected status in the name of democratic rights that would make it the minority. Most recently, the situation in Bahrain has been also complicated by suspicions, shared by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, that Iran is behind the Shia unrest. The situation in Bahrain has just become tremendously complicated, with a geopolitical dimension in addition to the domestic sectarian one – the struggle for political rights and democracy is thus a relatively minor component.

Kuwait is quite different. At the center of dissatisfaction in Kuwait is politics, not economic hardship or unemployment. To be sure, Kuwait grumbles about economic issues – a perennial demand in the country, backed by many MPs, is that the government should alleviate economic hardship by settling the credit card debts of its citizens. Real economic hardship of course exists in Kuwait, but the main sufferers, foreign laborers and the stateless bidoon, are not the politicized element of the population. The political struggle playing out in the tiny country is a classical contention for power between an elected parliament and a ruling family intent on preserving its prerogatives. The struggle was already underway before Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Parliament perennially threatened to question – grills in Kuwaiti parlance – ministers, including members of the royal family, and the emir threatened to dissolve the parliament. After the liberation of Kuwait in the first Gulf War, the ritual resumed and is continuing to this day. It is essentially a battle between a monarchy and an elected parliament that has been at the core of democratic change in many European countries and can only be settled politically. So far, a resolution is not in sight.

Rich Countries with Cash to Spend

The degree of wealth varies widely among Arab monarchies. Gulf monarchies, particularly Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, have among the highest per capita incomes in the world and can spend vast sums in the hope of buying social peace. Morocco and Jordan are middle income countries that cannot af-

ford to do the same, although they have also increased social spending. Bahrain and Oman are not as rich as other Gulf monarchies, but they both benefit from substantial aid from Saudi Arabia, which since the beginning of the uprising has pledged an additional \$10 billion over a ten year period to its two less wealthy neighbors.

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example. Increased spending has worked so far, in that there have been no disturbances in the country except in Eastern province. It is impossible, however, to know whether this calm is simply the result of political stagnation – people not being ready to act for themselves – or whether it indicates that the government successfully bought off discontent.

Judging by the infrequency and extremely narrow scope of protest in Saudi Arabia outside the Shia-dominated Eastern province, the first explanation seems most likely. Saudis simply have not given signs of wanting to rise up. True, neither did Tunisians or Egyptians before 2011, but there are no indications that Saudis are ready to turn that corner yet. Protest in Saudi Arabia is negligible. Families of people detained without charges for long periods have held small and essentially polite demonstrations – vigils might be a better word – in front of the ministry of interior demanding that their relatives be charged or released. A Facebook call for a “day of rage” in Riyadh in March 2011 netted a lone protester and some frustrated journalists.

The flooding of streets in Jeddah twice in two years as a result of the complete absence of a drainage system capable of handling heavy rains created much grumbling but no specific calls for action. And very few women heeded the call to drive in defiance of the law. Indeed, the only protests that deserve some attention are those in Eastern province, which are driven, as in neighboring Bahrain, by the social dynamics of discrimination against Shias and the resentment this engenders among the youth. Demonstrations in Eastern province, particularly around the town of Qatif, have not been particularly large, but they are persistent. Demonstrations by Shias, however, are the last thing that would convince the Saudi authorities to turn to reform to deal with unrest. Saudi Arabia is convinced that Iran is trying to foment unrest among Saudi Shias, not just among Bahrainis; the religious establishment, furthermore, takes an extremely negative view of Shias as not being true Muslims; and other dissatisfied Saudis are unlikely to join Shia-initiated protest for fear of being tarred with the same brush.

Despite the unimpressive scope of protest, Saudi authorities are sufficiently realistic to know that the kingdom is not necessarily immune to unrest. The of-



ficial line is that Saudi Arabia is different from other countries, that the monarchy is part of the fabric of society, and that the concept of political participation advocated by the West and by protesters in other countries is alien to Saudi Arabia, where all citizens can bring their grievances directly to the attention of the king. But policies introduced since the beginning of the Arab uprisings suggest that Saudis do not believe their own rhetoric. They are trying to stay ahead of potential trouble both with constant vigilance on the security level and with a flood of economic provisions that only a country with large and growing oil revenues could afford.

Since the beginning of 2011, King Abdullah has announced new measures amounting to some \$130 billion, many of them representing recurring expenses. Some of the money is going directly into the pockets of ordinary Saudi citizens – for example a 15% pay rise for government employees the king announced in March and an increase in unemployment benefits; other allocations are directed at supporting institutions on which the ruling family counts to maintain the status quo, particularly the religious establishment. The kingdom has offered its citizens easier loans, housing construction and job creation in the form of the requirement that the private sector hire more Saudis. Companies are now rated on the success of their saudization efforts, and those that receive a yellow or red rating – denoting different degrees of non-compliance – must take steps to remedy the situation. Whether this forced saudization of the labor force is a best approach to tackling the unemployment problems, it shows the government is taking the problem seriously.

Parallel to the efforts to support Saudis directly, the king has also increased support for religious institutions and for initiatives that might increase the hold of religion on the mind of young Saudis. Thus the government allocated \$53 million to support the country's Holy Quran Memorization Associations; it also increased by \$80 million the funding for the Bureau of Call and Guidance in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. In addition to such "hearts and minds" steps, however, it also introduced some openly repressive measures, such as a prohibition against defaming – i.e. criticizing – the grand mufti and members of the Senior Ulema Council; even more blatantly, it increased the funding for the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice – the police force charged with enforcing compliance with the prescription of Islam as interpreted in Saudi Arabia.

What has been absent from the provisions adopted by the Saudi government since the beginning of the Arab uprisings is any hint of political reform or even minor concessions to the spirit of participation and freedom that has driven protest in most countries. Indeed, the Saudi government's position on political reform has not changed.

Democracy is still rejected as an alien system, and the Saudi authorities argue that in practice Saudi citizens have much better access to their government than people in so-called democratic countries.

Superficially, the Saudi response to the possibility of unrest at home appears to contradict the positions it has taken in the case of other Arab uprisings. In Yemen, Libya, and Syria, the Saudi government has openly supported – with increasing stridency in the case of Syria – change. In fact, the Saudis resent the conclusion reached by numerous Arab and Western analysts that Saudi Arabia represents the force of counterrevolution. And to some extent they are right. Saudis have supported change they see necessary to restore stability and/or alter the regional balance of power in their favor. What Saudis do not support is change for the sake of enhancing political rights and citizens' participation. The Saudis worked hard with other GCC countries to convince Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down, but they seem satisfied with a transfer that leaves the political structure of Yemen largely intact, as long as the country settles down. They participated in the effort to depose Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi because he was a rogue with no regard for the stability of the region. And they have become the most ardent advocates of a strong international push against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad because they see such intervention as a unique opportunity to deal a severe blow to Iranian ambitions by taking out a major link in their arc of influence that extends from Tehran through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah and Hamas.

In the case of Bahrain, however, the only Gulf monarchy so far to be truly challenged by a protracted and increasingly violent uprising, the Saudis simply backed up the ruling family, throwing their support behind the status quo, sending in troops to help the government guard vital installations. The Saudis saw the uprising as the outcome of Iranian machinations to stir up the country's Shia majority and thus establish a bridgehead on the Western shore of the Gulf, in close proximity to the Saudi oil fields in the restive Eastern province. The same strategic imperative that makes the Saudi monarchy call for the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad also explains their determination to defend the Bahraini monarchy. The rights of citizens are not a central concern in either case.

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have also reacted to the possibility of internal unrest in their countries by increasing social spending, something they can do easily given the large size of their oil and (in Qatar) gas revenues and the small size of their populations. In a sense, this is paradoxical because the two countries do not face the problem of youth unemployment that is rampant in Saudi Ara-

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bia. They have also paid lip service to political reform directed at enhancing popular participation – the UAE has increased the number of voters who will be able to participate in elections for the Federal National Council and Qatar announced that in 2013 two-thirds of the members of the shura council will be elected. These reforms are more symbolic than real, since neither body has real power, but they indicate that both regimes feel the need to at least pay lip service to the idea of popular participation.

Oman, which saw a few demonstrations in the early months of the Arab uprisings, was able to bring the problem under control without much conflict or even tension through a mixture of small reforms and economic largesse.

Economic benefits will not buy peace forever, but for the time being the status quo persists in the Gulf monarchies. The status quo does not mean tranquility everywhere. Bahrain is in the midst of an acute conflict between the Sunni monarchy and the Shia population, as it has been, with different degrees of intensity, since the 1990s. Saudi Arabia's Eastern province is tense and troubled. And in Kuwait the battle between the monarchy and the parliament continues, without moving closer to a resolution. Old problems have not been solved, but major new ones have not emerged so far.

Attempting Political Reform

It would be simplistic to attribute the willingness of Morocco and to a smaller extent Jordan to take some steps toward reform solely to their lack of financial resources. Political reform has been on the agenda in both countries for a long time. Some reforms were introduced in Morocco during the 1990s, toward the end of King Hassan's reign. King Abdullah of Jordan has been promising, although not implementing, reform since coming to power in 1999. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that neither monarch could possibly have lavished on their populations benefits on the scale of the Gulf monarchies' in an attempt to curb unrest.

In Morocco, King Mohammed II embraced the political concession route decisively. With the first demonstrations in the streets of Rabat and Casablanca taking place on February 20, on March 9 the king announced

that he had ordered the drafting of a new constitution that would limit his own power and enhance that of the parliament. He appointed a committee of experts to carry out the task, giving them a June deadline, and then submitted the draft to a referendum – the time-honored Arab way of “consulting” the public without giving it a chance to debate the issues. To complete the process, elections for a new parliament were held on November 25 with voters giving the plurality of

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the votes to the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD).

The new constitution represents a step not toward constitutional monarchy, but toward greater power for the parliament and possibly for the prime minister. The king retains ultimate executive power, but for the first time the Moroccan cabinet will be able to meet and take decisions under leadership of the prime minister – as long as the decisions are not of strategic importance, in which case the king is in control again. The constitution is not clear about what makes an issue important enough to require the participation of the king, but it is the king who ultimately will make the decision.

At the very least, the new constitution has created more space for the elected parliament and for the cabinet to exercise greater power. The question is whether either will take advantage of the opportunity. Moroccan political parties have in the past refrained from challenging the king and parliaments have been hesitant to exercise their prerogatives. Time will tell whether things will change this time. The fact that the PJD obtained the plurality of votes in November and thus formed the government is no guarantee that the elected institutions will stand up to the king – the party is anxious to be fully accepted as a legitimate, mainstream political force and may play a cautious hand.

What is clear, however, is that by seizing the initiative of reform the king succeeded in taking the wind out of the protesters' sail. Discontent may well flare up again – Morocco's socioeconomic problems run deep and will not be solved quickly – but the king definitely proved that it is possible for a monarch to seize the initiative of reform, and maintain his throne and his legitimacy.

In Jordan, the king also supported the idea of political reform, but proceeded hesitantly in practice, as he had done previously. King Abdullah has always talked the talk of political reform. Letters of designation to new prime ministers invariably contain references to the need to promote democracy, enhance the judiciary, promote efficiency in the public sector, and take other measures that can be seen as part of a reform agenda. The king also launched several special initiatives to articulate a comprehensive vision for political and economic reform, including the Jordan First Initiative in 2003, the National Agenda of 2005, and the "We are all Jordanians" initiative of 2006. The fact that several such initiatives were launched in a short span of time tells the story clearly: proposals were never implemented, even when the planning had been extensive. The problem was that in the fragile political equilibrium of Jordan, any steps that may affect the distribution of power lead to strong opposition, making it easier for the king to shelve that to implement proposals. Differences in the personality of King Abdullah and King Mohammed may explain in part why the Moroccan king is willing to act more decisively, but there is also no doubt that he is in a stronger political position.



Political reform would inevitably change the balance of power in the country. Take for example Jordan's much criticized and confusingly named one-person-one-vote voting system, which does not mean that everybody is entitled to vote, but that each voter can choose only one candidate even if the district where s/he votes will send several representatives to the parliament. The system, all analyses show, favors the status quo. With only one vote to cast, citizens turn to local notables, particularly ones with a track record of bringing money to the district. This makes it difficult for political parties to form, because it hinges on clientelistic relations between the local representatives and the people who vote for them. As a result, it also facilitates corruption. There is no doubt that the system needs changing, but resistance, not surprisingly, is strong among people who benefit from the status quo. Supporting the change would thus have short-term negative consequences for the king, no matter what the long term benefits. The well-established pattern of promises of reform not followed by action is being replicated at present. The king has again replaced prime ministers and made promises of reform, but it is far too early to talk about concrete change. The fact that protest was limited and disorganized made it easier for Jordan to slip into the old pattern.

Monarchies and Reform

Arab monarchies present a rather bleak picture of resistance to change. Only Morocco moved decisively and Jordan timidly. Yet, with the exception of Bahrain and Kuwait, all had ample opportunity to introduce at least limited change while they were still firmly in control, their legitimacy intact. But they chose not to take advantage of the opportunity to move while they could easily control the process.

A number of factors explain this reluctance. Pressure from the population was minimal in most countries, and even while watching the fall of regimes all around the region, the monarchs probably did not feel the pressure directly. The fear of stepping on a slippery slope, where limited reform introduced from the top would become the first step toward an uncontrolled fall, was probably another. And the availability of large amounts of oil revenue made it possible for the Gulf monarchies to consider an approach to controlling possible unrest that did not entail change.

The experience of the last year should put an end to the frequently voiced idea that monarchical regimes can reform more easily than republican ones because kings can introduce change and yet retain their throne. What events show is that while monarchs might be able to do that, as King Mohammed did, in reality most do not want to. And that is probably the explanation why so many monarchies have disappeared: they may have had a comparative advantage in introducing reform, but they did not use it.