SHAPING A NEW EMIRATI IDENTITY

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In their efforts to prepare for a post-petroleum era, Gulf monarchies are scrambling to update their strategies of citizen and nation-building. The challenge is significant. In the past, such strategies emphasized the distribution of resource wealth. Rulers built cradle-to-grave welfare states, often in previously impoverished societies, for which citizens were generally very grateful. While the provision of material security and benefits was not the only driver of citizen loyalty — and ruling families certainly drew from other sources of legitimacy — it was a powerful and very concrete way of binding citizens to their new state in the decades after independence. It also built profitably on earlier traditions. “The perception of the ruler as a provider was not novel in the Arabian context,” Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed explains, “Oil only consolidated what had already been the foundation of rule, namely ‘generosity.” [1]

Now well into the 21st century, however, the distributional approach to citizen and nation-building is coming under growing strain. First, dwindling oil and gas resources along with the volatility of global markets mean that Gulf regimes may not be able to sustain their generous welfare systems, which are far more extensive than those outside of the Gulf often realize. Beyond education, healthcare, and other basic services, for example, many citizens expect a well-paid government job upon graduating from college, or even high school. Second, the early approach was not democratic in nature, and thus at odds with worldwide demands for greater political inclusiveness. As in many resource-rich states, the implicit social contract in Gulf monarchies is a rent-based one, with governments providing for citizens in exchange for their acquiescence to a generally authoritarian status quo.

In response to these looming challenges, Gulf rulers have sought to adapt their strategies of citizen and nation-building. How can they maintain citizen loyalty when citizens expect economic benefits that may not be sustainable? Or when citizens demand political rights that rulers long accustomed to top-down governance are unwilling to offer?

One of the most enthusiastic reformers has been the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Governing elites there have engaged in an unprecedented social engineering cam-
campaign aimed at reshaping citizenship norms, particularly in favor of greater economic self-reliance. The new citizenship ideal combines economic, civic, and cultural activism with continued political quiescence. It is essentially a vision of the citizen as loyal entrepreneurial bourgeois, melding elements of liberalism, neoliberalism, globalism, and authoritarianism. Citizens are expected to contribute more actively to their country’s economic development, to start businesses and stop expecting government jobs, to support their local communities, and to embrace a more open and cosmopolitan cultural milieu, without demanding any changes to the political system.

As in other cases of authoritarian social engineering, the vehicles for it have included substantial education reform, changes in public symbolism, and state-sponsored spectacles that teach and valorize the new citizenship ideal. Public schooling, for example, now pushes critical thinking, English, and market skills with lessened emphasis on religion and the humanities. Education reformers say they do not want students to passively memorize material, but to learn actively, prepare for more demanding careers outside of the government sector, and contribute to problem-solving in their communities. New civics programs emphasize values of responsibility and tolerance.

Public symbolism aims to imbue concepts such as work and citizenship with new meaning. In Vision 2021, the national strategy document, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the country’s president, explains in the introduction: “Work is a true criterion of citizenship. It is evidence of sincerity and loyalty. We all share the responsibility of building this country, protecting its sovereignty, and safeguarding the gains.” The strong implication is that being a good citizen requires working hard and contributing. At the same time, little mention is made of the “rights” side of the citizenship equation — that is, what citizens should expect in return.

Work in the private sector, in particular, is being recast not only as potentially patriotic, but also an activity that is uniquely personally fulfilling, in the Weberian sense. Young people are being told that government jobs are dull and uninspiring, and that to find fulfillment, they should start their own businesses or seek to prove themselves in private sector careers. For example, Dubai introduced the Young Entrepreneurs Competition in 2005, where a common slogan that can be found in large colorful letters on banners and other paraphernalia seeking to encourage entrepreneurialism is: “Don’t look for a job. Start your own.”

How is this social engineering faring? Is it working as leaders intend? In the UAE, research suggests mixed results.[2] A comparison of students in regular government schools versus government schools in which the social engineering reforms were fully implemented found evidence that the reforms are boosting nationalism and love of country, while inspiring stronger ideals of tolerance and community responsibility. Such results are aligned with social engineering goals as described above. But the research also found evidence of unintended consequences in the form of an increase in political and economic demands, including perceptions of a right to a government job.

What can we learn from the UAE’s efforts to update strategies of citizen and nation-building for a post-oil era? Perhaps the most important lesson is that existing citizenship attitudes are neither as rigid as theorists of the rentier state suggest nor as malleable as optimistic social engineers expect. Through their social engineering efforts, Gulf reformers may be able to encourage some changes in rentier citizenship norms. The evidence suggests that UAE social engineers were able to foster greater citizen engagement from a social and civic perspective. Yet the economic core of the rentier citizenship model appears to be more rigidly ingrained, even inclined to ossify further. Norms of civic engagement, in short, may be easier to inculcate than norms of economic engagement. The latter may be less amenable to social engineering alone, and will likely require a broader and more inclusive political process to fundamentally alter.