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POLITICAL REFORM IN THE GULF MONARCHIES: FROM LIBERALISATION TO DEMOCRATISATION? A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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by

Gerd Nonneman

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See www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/politics/people/nonneman/nonneman.htm

POLITICAL REFORM IN THE GULF MONARCHIES
From Liberalisation to Democratisation? A Comparative Perspective

Gerd Nonneman[1]

1.0   INTRODUCTION

After decades of being stereotyped as anachronistic exceptions amidst a changing tide of modernisation and democratisation that was assumed to be working its way around the world, the six states comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of the Gulf have recently begun to draw interest for a different reason. A series of reforms in the first five years of the 21st century in countries such as Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and even Saudi Arabia suggested that these polities were not, perhaps, quite so uniformly and unchangeably 'autocratic' or 'absolutist' – indeed that they might in some ways even hold out a more positive prospect of political reform than the rest of the Middle East. This paper is an attempt to asses, explain and interpret what may be happening, and to consider what the implications might be for the future. It does so by linking the experience of the Gulf states (and the Middle East more widely) with the comparative experience of democratisation and liberalisation in other places and at other times.

The GCC states are a particularly interesting case study not only because of these recent developments. Apart from the obvious fact that they are of interest due to their strategic and economic significance for the rest of the world, these polities stand out from other cases in several ways: they are, for the most part, exceptionally rich, certainly by developing world standards, but in the case of the UAE and Qatar even by global comparison; their political and economic systems are based to a significant extent on 'rent' (derived from the export of hydrocarbons); they are monarchies – with the monarchs and royal families, moreover, exercising real power; they are, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent Oman, very small polities; and they are characterised also by the prominence of traditionalist themes and *motifs* in social and political organisation and in regime strategies and discourse. They form an intriguing comparative set of cases, therefore, from all these angles.

Any discussions of political reform are dogged by definitional issues over what one means by 'democracy', 'democratisation', or, perhaps even more vaguely, 'liberalisation'. This is true for academic analyses as much as for policy (or indeed political) discussions. In this paper we are interested in the whole gamut of developments from limited loosening of controls, all the way to 'democratisation' proper. But that still leaves us with the task of defining terms: answers to questions about various kinds of reform depend very much on how one fills in the meaning of those terms. 'Democratisation' can be either an intentional or a *de facto* series of developments aiming at, or with some likelihood of leading to, 'democracy'. 'Democracy', for the purposes of this paper, can come in any number of forms, not necessarily identified with any particular 'Western' or 'liberal' variety: the key components are (1) political

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[1]   This paper is part of 'work in progress,' so the author invites comment and criticism, via g.nonneman@lancaster.ac.uk.

participation; (2) accountability; and (3) pluralism. 'Liberalisation' could be defined in two ways: a first, very general understanding would apply the label to any kind of 'opening', from minor relaxing of government controls, all the way to the kind of reform that could credibly be termed 'democratisation'. A more limited use of the term would reserve it for openings and reforms short of democratisation, i.e. 'freedom from' rather than 'freedom to.' Certainly, Liberalisation is not the same as Democratisation, although more advanced forms of the former may shade into the latter.[2] One question to be explored, indeed, is precisely whether in particular cases liberalisation may stand in contradistinction to democratisation.

In what follows, I first briefly consider the nature of the GCC states (section 2), and comment on the extent of political participation in these states until the turn of the century (section 3). Following a brief survey of recent reforms (section 4), I turn to a comparative interpretation of the evidence of liberalisation and democratisation elsewhere (section 5), before considering how this might help explain those recent reforms in the GCC states (section 6). The paper then considers the other side of the coin: considering the observed and potential limitations to the GCC reforms (section 7); will these societies, indeed, remain trapped in 'liberalisation' rather than ever crossing over to 'democratisation'?

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[2]   See Gerd Nonneman, 'Patterns of Political Liberalization: Explanations and Modalities', in Nonneman (ed.), *Political and Economic Liberalization: Dynamics and Linkages in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996), pp. 45-62: at 45-46.

2.0 THE GCC STATES: TRADITION OR MODERNITY?

There have been two opposing but equally 'exceptionalist' approaches to the question of democracy, or political participation, in the Arab monarchical polities in the Gulf. The first, as already suggested, painted these polities as anachronisms stuck in traditional authoritarian absolutism or oligarchy. The second equally stressed their traditional nature, interpreting them as reflecting the traditional Arabian features and values of egalitarianism, personal access, and 'desert democracy,' with majlises (Arabic singular: *majlis*; plural: *majalis*) as the functional equivalent of participatory channels. Neither are particularly useful. Not only is it clear that these systems have indeed undergone change in recent years, taking them away from the anachronistic stereotype. It is also untenable to see them as 'traditional' systems at all – even though elements of tradition remain and, in part, have been consciously used by the ruling families to build state, 'nation,' and political control and acquiescence. The creation of state structures in the 20th century; the consolidation of the position of the ruling families by the combined effect of foreign protection and oil revenues; the subsequent demographic, social and economic effects of oil wealth, and the accompanying expansion and increasing complexity of society, economy and governing apparatus – all of this has turned these countries into what might be called 'neo-traditionalist' systems.

Some traditional values remain prevalent in society, whether with regard to religion, social status, the importance of personal connections, and attitudes towards kinship – including a respect for 'leading families'. The ruling families have also consciously used these themes and instruments derived from them to build their legitimacy and instruments of control. Yet this is all taking place in societies and polities whose size and complexities, technologies and administrative systems, and linkages to the outside world, have changed beyond recognition. In that new context, various elements of 'tradition' have been reinterpreted and appropriated both by the regimes and different parts of the populations.[3] From the regimes' side, this includes new ways of using what only superficially resembles the old patrimonial style and mechanisms – hence the terms 'neo-patrimonialism' and, as Hisham Sharabi labels it, 'neo-patriarchy'[4] (not only for these monarchical systems).

Clearly, then, these states are no longer 'traditional'. John Peterson has made a compelling argument that they are in fact better characterised as 'post-traditional':[5] not yet modern, but no longer even 'neo-traditional'. He defines the latter as the sort of systems of rule

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[3]   See for instance Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Mary Ann Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy: politics and society in contemporary Kuwait* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).; Russell Lucas, 'Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type', in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36 (2004), pp. 103-119; John Peterson, 'The Emergence of Post-Traditional Oman', Durham Middle East papers no. 78 (Sir William Luce Fellowship Paper no. 5), Durham University, January 2005; Chris Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates: A Study in Survival* (Bouder: Lynne Rienner, 2005), Chapter 2: 'The Survival of Monarchy;' and Lisa Anderson on the invention of tradition in 'Dynasts and nationalists: why Middle Eastern monarchies survive', in Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *Middle East monarchies: the challenge of modernity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000), pp. 53-69.

[4]   Hisham Sharabi, *Neo-patriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in the Arab World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)

[5]   Peterson, 'The Emergence of Post-Traditional Oman'.

exemplified by Sultan Sa'id bin Taimur of Oman (until 1970), or Abdul-Aziz bin Abdul-Rahman Al-Sa'ud: rulers who 'sought to preserve the existing traditional society, values and goals by enhancing or enlarging the capability to control the state [but who thereby] altered the nature of the decentralized political system.'[6] This tends to be followed fairly shortly by a longer 'post-traditional' phase, where modernisation of one sort or another is actively pursued, without making these systems 'modern'. This seems a clarification worth making. The most accurate representation of these polities would therefore be to label them *post-traditional states using neo-traditionalist forms and methods*. Some, of course, are further along this road than others: Kuwait and Bahrain could might be classed as closer to the 'modern' end of the post-traditional spectrum than, at the other end, most of the UAE and Oman).

This has important implications for our treatment of the question of democratisation or political reform.

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[6] John Peterson, 'Legitimacy and Political Change in Yemen and Oman', in *Orbis*, Vol. 27 (1984), No. 4, pp. 971-998: p. 985.

3.0 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE GCC STATES
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Once the ruling families of the polities now making up the GCC were firmly in place and buttressed by oil rent, they swiftly eclipsed any domestic competitors for power. In the distant past, the concept of a traditional Arabian 'desert democracy' might have had some relevance – with small and simple entities characterised by very limited surplus resources, and fluctuating fortunes of ruling clans and individuals, combining with traditions of personal access, and ruling families less than assured either of superior resources or of certain support. Yet foreign involvement and oil comprehensively altered those dynamics. Even though all of the current monarchies have historical roots and a long-standing connection with their domains, it is nevertheless the case that without the resources that foreign powers (mainly Britain) and oil represented, several states or emirates would not have come into, or remained in, existence, while in those that did, the ruling family, or its ruling branches, might well have been different. There was competition from outside these rulers' realms, but also from within – witness the relative power of Kuwait's Al Sabah and the merchants until the advent of the oil age after the second World War.[7] The situation changed beyond recognition since then. The relative power position of the ruling family, and of the ruler and his immediate family, left any erstwhile balancing forces in society far behind.

These polities became, to varying extents, 'rentier states,' (or 'allocation states', as Luciani named them): polities whose economies, and hence political systems, came to depend predominantly on the 'rent' ('unearned income') derived from oil sales, in which only a tiny fraction of the population or domestic activity was involved. This obviated the need for taxation and lent the state (and regime) far-reaching autonomy from society, and indeed the ability to balance, foster or even create societal groups. The implied logic of the 'no taxation without representation' motto of most of the literature on democracy and democratisation was thus arguably reversed: 'no representation without taxation'. By and large, the population acquiesced in a system where, as long as government policy maintained this rentier arrangement and did not act against key values (e.g. traditional local interpretations of Islam), they had more to lose than to gain from upheaval. This was further facilitated by a traditional set of values and mechanisms assuring a sense that rulers by and large acted in accordance with the values and interests of the population. This social contract applied most strongly from the 1970s to the mid-1980s – when a combination of the evolution of oil prices and markets, globalising pressures in the world economy, the population explosion, and social change – followed from the 1990s by new external pressures for political reform – began to change the scene.[8]

That is not to say that some pattern of consultation and pre-emption of grievances through the use of personal and traditional networks did not persist – but it became a peripheral

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[7] Jill Crystal, Crystal, J, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 - 2nd edition).

[8] See Gerd Nonneman, *Governance, Human Rights, and the Case for Political Adaptation in the Gulf* (RSC policy paper 01-3) (Florence: Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute, 2001) (http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/WP-Texts/01_03p.pdf).

feature when compared with the more direct levers of power the rulers could employ. Kuwait was a partial exception, in its early adoption of a constitution that provided for a significant role of an elected parliament – in part reflecting a longer tradition of political mobilisation (especially among the merchant class), in part related to the presence to the immediate north of the ideological and irredentist threat of Iraq, but in any case a sign of a degree of willingness on the part of the ruling family to allow political participation, that was unlike elsewhere in the region.[9] Even there, of course, the parliament's actual power remained limited, and it could be, and was, suspended by the Amir for extended periods. Indeed, the attempted emasculation of the constitution after 1986 was only reversed against the background of the Iraqi invasion of 1990.[10]

In Bahrain, too, the early experiment with parliamentary constitutionalism was soon ended, and, even with its relatively politically mobilised and educated populace, the emirate gradually took on some of the appearances of a repressive police state – its socially liberal climate notwithstanding. In the other states, political participation, or any limits on the ruling family's power, except formally from conventions of Islamic probity, were virtually absent. Oman's monarchy would, admittedly, have to wait for this position of untrammelled power until 1975 and the end of the civil war, but by then the usual combination of foreign assistance and oil rent – plus a visionary co-optation and hearts-and-minds policy on the part of Sultan Qaboos – had achieved the same result also here. In Saudi Arabia, only the Al al-Shaikh and the Wahhabi establishment have often been portrayed as a 'partner in power', supporting Al-Sa'ud rule as long as the latter kept its side of the bargain of supporting the *Wahhabiya* – but in fact the latter long since became the (very) junior partner in this relationship.[11]

Traditional forms of interaction with society were still maintained, in part in order to gauge opinion and pre-empt grievances, in part to help maintain the system of patronage and personal and tribal alliances, and in part simply to project an image of the rulers' upholding traditional values. Clearly, this was not *only* an cosmetic exercise, but in the post-traditional phase of these polities, such traditional channels of communication, 'venting', or participation, as for instance in the regular majlises held by senior shaikhs or princes, or indeed the ruler himself, no longer fulfilled their erstwhile function effectively. This was so both because the dynamics of the political system had changed, and both need and intention to allow genuine input from below had become vanishingly small; but also because society and economy had become incomparably larger and more complex, as had its administration: in that context such traditional channels *could* no longer be sufficient, even for the non-participatory purposes the rulers wished to use them for.[12] Nevertheless, they remained important as legitimizing parts of the regimes' neo-traditionalist strategy – not least because they linked into the existing traditions at the societal level, as with the Kuwaiti *diwaniyyas*,

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[9]   Jill Crystal & Abdullah al-Shayeji, 'The pro-democracy Agenda in Kuwait', in Bahgat Korany, Rex Brynen & Paul Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Vol. 2 – Comparative Experiences* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), pp. 101-126.

[10]   Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy*.

[11]   See Guido Steinberg, 'The Wahhabi Ulama and the Saudi State: 1745 to the Present', in Paul Aarts & Gerd Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Societ, Foreign Affairs* (New York / London: New York University Press / Hurst & Co., 2005), pp. 11-34.

for instance. It should also be said that, the smaller the polity, the more such mechanisms' usefulness was likely to survive at least in part.

The retention and re-invention of traditional forms of the link between rulers and ruled did also, it has to be said, form part of a broader socio-political environment where a measure of 'social pluralism' was accepted – albeit more in some of these states than in others: these were never totalitarian systems, nor 'atomised' societies. Traditional tribal corporatism was extended into new formats in these post-traditional socio-political environments. Even if the *political* leverage of various old and new social groups was extremely limited, they remained – and in some cases became – significant in other ways, in social and economic dynamics. Indeed in the rentier state context sketched above, regimes were able to balance or form such groups. On the one hand, this was an additional means for the ruling group to manage the system and preserve their power. Yet by the same token, it helps explain the survival of 'political space' – in effect space for the development and functioning of 'civil society' – as shown perhaps most clearly by the case of Kuwait and its *diwaniyyas*, among other instances.[13] I will pick up this theme again in section 6 below. Regimes could use sometimes harsh methods of repressing challenges and dissent – but they were not concerned to abolish such social pluralism, and by and large preferred co-optation and alternative means of obtaining acquiescence.

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[13]   Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy.*

4.0   THE REFORMS SO FAR

As already suggested, changing circumstances both internal and external brought pressure for reform from the second half of the 1980s, starting from quite different bases in the different GCC states, and being responded to in various ways and to varying extents by the ruling families. The rash of reforms introduced in all GCC states since the late 1990s caused considerable interest in the region and beyond: something, clearly, was going on that seemed at first sight to break both with local political tradition and with wider Arab political patterns. These states – or at least some of them – now came to be seen by some as the exception that would prove Arab democratisation was possible after all.

This is not the place to detail the various reforms in each of the six states: the space is lacking, and the information can be found in a number of other sources.[14] My purpose in this paper is to interpret and compare the dynamics of these developments, and suggest what they might mean for the future. Here, some brief factual comments will suffice.

Kuwait
Kuwait witnessed an apparent consolidation and assertion of parliamentary power – first in the formal restoration of the constitution and a series of hard-fought elections since 1992; vigorous parliamentary questioning of ministers (and some forced resignations); the blocking of key government proposals – indeed, paradoxically, even the Amir's own decree allowing women to vote; the final enfranchisement of women, approved by parliament after a change of position by a majority of Islamist MPs in 2005; and, most recently, the central constitutional role of the parliament in the succession crisis from Shaikh Jabir to Shaikh Sabah as Amir in 2006, and the blocking of the government's preferred electoral redistricting model (see section 7 below).[15]

Bahrain
The sudden change in the Bahraini political climate following the accession of Shaikh Hamad in 1998, turned the country from one of the more egregious examples of repression in the Gulf to one of its more conciliatory systems through the introduction of a new constitution and significant liberalisation, including parliamentary elections. The changes brought about a huge surge in popularity for the Emir and the Crown Prince when it became clear that a genuine break with the past was being made. Indeed, the speed and extent of the reforms pushed through by the Amir, less than two years after his succession, can be seen as

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[14]   See in particular Andrzej Kapiszewski, 'Elections and parliamentary Activity in the GCC States', in Abdulhadi Khalaf and Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2006), pp. 88-131; and Giovanni Parolin, 'Generations of Gulf Constitutions: Paths and Perspectives', in Khalaf & Luciani (eds.), *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf,* pp. 51-87. Also Michael Herb, 'Princes, Parliaments, and the prospects for Democracy in the Gulf', in Marsha Pripstein Posusney & Mechele Penner Angrist (eds.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005), pp. 169-191; Ehteshami, 'Reform from Above'; and, on developments in 2005, Hassanain Tawfiq Ibrahim, 'Internal Political Developments in the GCC States: An Overview', in *Gulf Yearbook 2005-2006* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2006), pp. 15-69.
[15]   For details see Kapiszewski, 'Elections and parliamentary Activity in the GCC States', pp. 98-107; Parolin, 'Generations of Gulf Constitutions', pp. 61-84.

a conscious attempt to establish a new political base for his rule, and partly neutralising challengers from within the ruling family. Emergency laws were abolished, and long-exiled opposition leaders returned to the country, taking part in the debate and dialogue with the reforming monarchy and government, and with other political forces. In December 2000, Shaikh Hamad assumed the title of King, as part of a formal re-labelling of the country as a constitutional monarchy. Yet following the initial overwhelming approval in a popular referendum, of a 'National Action Charter' setting out the main lines of the new political dispensation, the Amir unilaterally adjusted the constitution to include a non-elected second chamber that would have an equal legislative role. This brought opposition objections and, in the end, a boycott by the mainly Shia opposition of the first parliamentary elections under the new system in 2002. The resulting parliament consequently contained a majority of Sunni Islamist members. Much of the political struggle since then has been over the question of constitutional change and, within the opposition, over whether to continue the boycott or participate in the 2006 elections. In the end, the main opposition movement, *al-Wifaq*, decided to participate in the next elections scheduled for 2006.[16]

Qatar
Qatar has known little organised opposition, but when the Emir allowed free municipal elections in March 1999, participation was intense. The country's small population and future gas riches meant the Emir could be assumed to be under less pressure than elsewhere to open up the system. That he did so nevertheless, in quite striking fashion, a few years after ousting his father as ruler, indicates his appreciation that there was indeed a demand to be tapped into, not least among the educated younger generation staffing much of the private and public sector, including the armed forces. As in the case of his namesake, Sheikh Hamad of Bahrain, it served to buttress his power base against potential challengers within the regime.[17] Formal censorship and the information ministry were abolished, and elections for the Central Municipal Council were held for the first time in 1999, allowing women both to vote and to stand. In 2002 a draft new constitution was presented stipulating universal elections of a unicameral parliament of 45 members, of whom 15 would be appointed; the parliament was to have the right to legislate, vote on the state budget, question ministers and, with a two-thirds majority, vote ministers out of office. It could overturn an Amiri rejection of parliamentary legislation with a two-thirds majority, although the Amir reserved the right to suspend such legislation temporarily. The new constitution was approved in 2003, and became effective from July 2005, holding out national parliamentary elections for early 2007. Political parties, however, remain banned.[18]

Saudi Arabia
Reform in the Kingdom began to take shape in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War, with the promulgation of the Basic Law in 1992 and the introduction of the appointed *Majlis al-Shura* the following year – a *Majlis* that was gradually expanded and carved for itself an

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[16] For details see Kapiszewski, 'Elections and parliamentary Activity in the GCC States', pp. 107-114; Parolin, 'Generations of Gulf Constitutions', pp. 61-84.

[17] See Andrew Rathmell & Kirsten Schulze, 'Political Reform in the Gulf: the case of Qatar', in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, no. 4, (October 2000), pp. 47-62.

[18] For details see Kapiszewski, 'Elections and parliamentary Activity in the GCC States', pp. 114-117; Parolin, 'Generations of Gulf Constitutions', pp. 61-84.

increasingly forceful role even behind the curtain of secrecy that officially shrouded its work, especially through the workings of the specialised committees that were established in 2001.[19] In 2005, the new *Majlis* was expanded to 150, and several senior figures intimated that it was to be allowed to scrutinise the budget, and might eventually be two-thirds elected.[20] Almost simultaneously, a major reform of the much-criticised judicial system was announced.[21]

Although the municipal elections of 2005 were the most immediately visible sign of recent reform in the Kingdom, they came against a background of already expanded room for discussion both in the media and in the context of the 'National Dialogue' started by Crown Prince Abdullah, which had reached its fifth session by 2005 However constrained in its remit, and however limited the feed-through to society at large and to actual policy, the Dialogue was nevertheless an indication of a changing context and an awareness of a need for a different regime response (whether substantial or tactical). The very fact that a number of issues that were previously taboo could now at least be discussed, and that in the process previously 'illegitimate' voices such as those of Shi'a religious figures were given formally equal standing as discussion partners in a form established publicly by the Crown Prince, was without question an important departure.

But it was the municipal elections, for half the nearly 12,000 seats of the country's 178 municipal councils, that drew the most attention internationally. Originally announced for 2004, they took place in three regional rounds between February and April 2005. The remaining half of the seats were to be appointed; the councils do not deal with 'political' issues but only with local services and planning matters; women were barred from either standing or voting, albeit for 'logistical', not legal reasons; and no group campaigns, platforms or manifestoes were allowed – let alone political parties. These were not in fact the Kingdom's first-ever elections: when first conquering the Hijaz, Abdul-Aziz Al Sa'ud had taken account of local sensitivities by establishing an elected *Majlis al-Shura* for the region in addition to five municipal councils for the main towns;[22] and in the 1950s, under King Sa'ud, local elections were begun, only for the experiment to be shelved when King Faisal came to power.[23]

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[19] See Mohammad al-Muhanna, 'The Saudi Majlis ash-Shura: Domestic Functions and International Role' (PhD thesis, Institute of Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, Durham University, 2005). This is also the only study to provide comprehensive detail on the nature, extent, and effect of the work of the Committees, and to survey systematically Majlis members' views on their own powers.

[20] Strikingly also, a debate was held on Saudi TV in early April on the merits of elections for the Council (even if both invited speakers advocated gradualism, thus mirroring the majority view among members). *Saudi Gazette*, 13 April 2005; *Arab News*, 13 April 2005; SPA dispatch 13 April 2005; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Saudi Arabia Report* May 2005, pp. 12-16; for the views of Council members themselves see also Al-Muhanna, 'The Saudi Majlis ash-Shura.'

[21] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Saudi Arabia Report* May 2005, pp. 12-16.

[22] Al-Muhanna, 'The Saudi Majlis ash-Shura', chapter 4; and Abdulaziz Al Fahad, 'Ornamental Constitutionalism: The Saudi Basic Law of Governance', paper for the Sixth Mediterranean Social and political Research Meeting, Montecatini, 16-20 March 2005,Workshop 13.

[23] Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom* (pre-publication version, 2005, posted on http://cas.uchicago.edu/ workshops/cpolit/papers/vitalis.doc).

Even so, from the perspective of the post-1960s era, the 2005 elections were a significant development, both in themselves and for the way they unfolded and the atmosphere that developed around them. The three rounds produced a similar pattern: fairly low voter registration; high turn-out among those registered; vigorous competition for the seats; in many places moderate Islamist candidates sweeping the board, not least because they had been the better organised; a clear sectarian tinge to the results in the Eastern Province; clear evidence of group politics even though group platforms and campaigning had been banned; and campaigning focused mainly on real local issues of practical importance to the daily lives of local residents – not on broader philosophical or ideological issues.[24] In sum, while this was by no means a democratic breakthrough, the elections both illustrated and stimulated interest in participatory politics and in the wider issues and questions associated with it.[25]

Oman
Oman remains, in essence, an absolute monarchy: Sultan Qaboos singly remains the ultimate arbiter – with even other members of the ruling family kept at a decidedly second rung. Yet reform of sorts had been taking gradual shape with a succession of consultative mechanisms, evolving into the State Consultative Council as of 1981, which was in turn replaced by the *Majlis al-Shura* in 1991. Notable citizens from each of the provinces nominated two candidates each, of whom the Sultan chose one. Additionally, additional members were appointed – increasing as the Council was expanded to 80 in 1994, when the first two women were also appointed. In 1996, the Sultan issued the Basic Law, the first time the basic outlines of the country's principles of governance were laid down. The following year, he established a new appointed consultative body – a 'second chamber' – in the shape of the *Majlis al-Dawla* (State Council) – made up by prominent figures such as tribal notables, senior businessmen and former government officials (together, the two Councils were henceforth known as the *Majlis Oman*).

When the rules for the Majlis al-Shura were changed to feature direct elections for the first time (albeit still with a restricted electorate) in 2000, considerable competition ensued. Finally, Oman introduced universal suffrage for the elections of 2003 – even if the resulting parliament still has only an advisory, not a legislative role, and cannot discuss matters of defence, foreign affairs, security and finance.[26] Council members also, with a few exceptions, remained quite timid in exploring the extent of their formal powers. In the event, a modest 34 % of eligible voters registered to vote (262,000), although 74% of those registered

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[24]   *Saudi Gazette*, 13 & 22 April 2005; *Arab News*, 13-29 April 2005; SPA dispatch 13 April 2005; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Saudi Arabia Report* May 2005, pp. 12-16; 'Third Round balloting Marks End of Landmark Elections', on Saudi-US Relations, 23 April 2005 (www.saudi-us-relations.org/newsletter2005/saudi-relations-interest-04-23.html) (plus the links offered there); and *Gulf News*, 24 April 2005, 'Citizens debate Islamists' win in municipal elections.'

[25]   For detail and an assessment on the Saudi reform process, see Paul Aarts & Gerd Nonneman, 'A Triple Nexus: Ideology, Economy, Foreign Policy and the Outlook for the Saudi Polity', in Aarts & Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance*, pp. 433-455, especially pp. 443-455; also Kapiszewski, 'Elections and parliamentary Activity in the GCC States', pp. 90-98; Parolin, 'Generations of Gulf Constitutions', pp. 61-84; and Amr Hamzawy, 'The Saudi Labyrinth: Evaluating the Current Political Opening' (Carnegie Endowment, Middle East Series, No. 68, April 2006).

[26]   For details see Kapiszewski, 'Elections and parliamentary Activity in the GCC States', pp. 117-120; and Parolin, 'Generations of Gulf Constitutions', pp. 61-84..

(194,000) then did vote. That said, the mechanics of the actual elections themselves were professionally and neutrally handled.[27]

UAE

Formal participatory systems in the UAE remain the least developed of any of the GCC states. Each of the seven Amirs remains the sovereign power within his own emirate, although some (most prominently Sharjah) have introduced appointed consultative bodies. At the Federal level, the Federal National Council (FNC) has some of the apparatus of a parliamentary body, with special committees and established voting procedures, but it cannot initiate or block legislation, and its relevance is limited by the retention of real power by the individual Amirs. Even so, the number of subjects discussed has de facto increased since the late 1990s, and ministers (including ruling family members) have been questioned.[28] The most recent and potentially significant development was the December 2005 announcement by Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Amir of Abu Dhabi and President of the UAE since the death of his father, Shaikh Zayed, in 2004, that half of the FNC would be elected by the relevant council of each Emirate, while it would also be expanded and see its powers enhanced.[29]

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[27]   observation and interviews in Oman, October 2003.

[28]   The best recent description and in-depth analysis of the UAE's political system is Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates*, especially Chapter 4: 'Domestic Pathologies and the political Process', pp. 185-250. See also Kapiszewski, 'Elections and parliamentary Activity in the GCC States', pp. 121-122; and Parolin, 'Generations of Gulf Constitutions', pp. 61-84.

[29]   Ibrahim, 'Internal Political Developments in the GCC States', pp. 15-16, 26-27.

5.0 A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: FACTORS FAVOURING DEMOCRATISATION

Comparative studies indicate that a varying combination of factors tend to be involved in driving liberalisation and democratisation. These include, on the one hand, the role of 'domestic actors', and on the other, environmental / structural factors and external actors – it being understood that there is a mutual influence between these two categories.

- The relevant *domestic actors* include regimes, other groups, political parties, and individuals. These act on the basis both of calculation of interest and ideational motivations.

- The second category comprises:
  i. *domestic factors (or structures)* such as (a) the political economy in question, (b) technology, (c) societal factors such as literacy, urbanisation, (d) the characteristics of civil society, (e) nature of the political system and its levels and bases of legitimacy, and (f) cultural factors;
  ii. *external factors (or structures) and actors (or agents)*, including (a) the role of particular external actors, (b) the characteristics of the international political economy; (c) the 'Zeitgeist'
  Once again, of course, (i) and (ii) are largely intertwined and impact on each other.

It is within the context shaped by the second category of factors and actors, that the actors referred to in the first category – not least the regimes – calculate their strategies and tactics. In other words, structure and agency, ideas and interests, long-term features and more immediate circumstances, all play (usually interrelated) roles, albeit in differing combinations at different times and different places: none can be singled out as deterministic by itself.

Below I summarise what, beyond this, I take to be the main lessons from past comparative work; most of this will prove of direct relevance to the case of the GCC states.

1. Liberalisation / democratisation tends to be driven by a combination of top-down responses and pre-emptive moves, and bottom-up pressures;[30] in turn, these occur in an external environment that may hinder or help the process.

2. Regimes when liberalising do not usually intend to allow more than 'decompression' while retaining ultimate control, but may not be able to stop further development once the process has achieved a certain momentum and sufficient (and sufficiently organised) pressure is exerted by groups in society.[31]

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[30] This insight recurs throughout much of the literature, from Seymour Martin Lipset onwards: see the survey in Nonneman, 'Patterns of Political Liberalization' (incl. note 1, p. 60); also John Markoff, *Waves of Democracy: Social Movements and Social Change* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1996).

[31] Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Markoff, *Waves of Democracy*; and N. Hamilton & E. Kim, 'Economic and Political Liberalization in South Korea and Mexico', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 14 (1993), no. 1, pp. 109-136: p. 113.

3. Real democratisation is not a forgone conclusion but when it does emerge it tends to be after a lengthy process that can feature repeated setbacks.[32]

4. An independent bourgeoisie can be a major actor and factor in such an outcome, where they see their interests constrained by the existing authoritarian system, and especially when allies for reform are found within the regime.[33] Yet there is a distinction to be made between different parts of the bourgeoisie, or indeed the middle class: 'small-scale entrepreneurs and the professional middle classes [may be] more likely to support democratization; the major owners of capital, especially those benefiting from state contracts and largesse, are much more likely to support continued authoritarian rule.'[34] Even so, cross-national evidence does present compelling evidence that the growth of the middle class *tends* to have a positive influence on the level of democracy.[35]

5. Where civil society more broadly speaking already had a significant level of organisation, it is more likely that some form of democratisation is the outcome of this process.[36] Equally, it is worth noting the example of Yemen, where civil society has shown a striking vitality, quickly filling 'any space ceded to it by the state,' as Carapico has shown.[37] The Yemeni case has produced a pattern where precedents of civic activity become entrenched and are repeated, under persistent pressure from civil society, even if such expanded activity periodically contracts again in the face of repression: 'each period of repression yielded a new regime needful of civic state-building efforts to fortify itself.'[38] By the same token, it must be recognised that civil society is not necessarily 'democratic.'[39] The room for, or development of civil society, of course, is itself shaped by many of the other factors discussed in this section – not least by development and changing class configurations.

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[32] This emerges from any number of cases studies and historical surveys. See for instance Diamond, Linz & Lipset, 'Introduction', and Markoff, *Waves of Democracy*.

[33] The role of the bourgeoisie is key in Barrington Moore's *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (London: Allen Lane, 1967); see also Lipset, *Political Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

[34] Diamond, Linz & Lipset, 'Introduction', p. 23; also John Waterbury, 'Democracy without Democrats?' in Salamé (ed.), *Democracy without Democrats?*, pp. 23-47.

[35] See e.g. Renske Doorenspleet, 'Political Democracy: A Cross-National Quantitative Analysis of Modernization and Dependency Theories', in *Acta Politica: International Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 32 (1997), no. 4, pp. 347-374.

[36] Guillermo O'Donnell & Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and Diamond, Linz & Lipset, 'Introduction', pp. 27-31.

[37] Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 207 *et passim*.

[38] Ibid., p. 17.

[39] Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany & Paul Noble, 'Introduction: Theoretical perspectives on Arab Liberalization and Democratization', in (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner 1995), pp. 3-28: at 10-14.

6.   Economic growth and increasing wealth *in itself* may not necessarily bring democratisation (the claim originally made by Lipset,[40] although subsequently qualified[41]) – indeed, much depends on how that wealth is created and distributed: in the 'rentier state' model, where most wealth is created with little involvement of the population and accrues directly to the state, this gives the state autonomy from society and the ability to create, placate, and control societal groups, and to avoid the need for taxation (and hence presumably representation).[42] It also depends on how such growth and wealth, together with development more broadly, enhance 'crucial intervening variables' in political culture, civil society capability, class structure, and the nature of the state.[43] Indeed, it is socio-economic development more broadly that the evidence shows to be positively correlated both with greater levels of democracy directly and with a larger middle class (and hence indirectly with levels of democracy) – even if these causal links are neither universal nor all-explanatory.[44]

7.   Conversely, a low or reduced availability of rent also cannot, by itself, 'be considered a sufficient or even necessary condition for democratization':[45] some of the most authoritarian states have much less access to such rent than others that have been liberalising – with Syria being a Middle Eastern case in point.[46]

8.   A more generally valid factor is economic *change*, as it changes (and, crucially, widens) the distribution of 'power resources' (Kimber & Vanhanen's 'Index of Power Resources' includes three sub-indices: the 'index of occupational diversification' (taking in the percentage of urban population and the percentage of non-agricultural population); the 'index of knowledge distribution' (taking in proportion of students, and literacy levels); and 'index of distribution of economic resources' (measured by percentage share of family farms out of total area of holdings, and degree of centralisation of non-agricultural resources)).[47] Economic growth, or development, can be one such kind of change – but so, at least as importantly, can be economic crisis, and in particular the fiscal crisis of the state.

9.   One element in 'development', viz. technology, proves important both because it impacts on the economy (and on international economic linkages) and social

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40   Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (London: Heinemann, 1983 [2nd edition].

41   In Larry Diamond, Juan Linz & Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Introduction: What makes for Democracy?', in Diamond, Linz & Lipset (eds.), Politics in Developing Countries – 2nd edition (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995), pp. 1-66: p. 24.

42   Giacomo Luciani, 'Allocation versus Production States', in Giacomo Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 65-84.

43   Diamond, Linz & Lipset, 'Introduction', p. 24.

44   Dorenspleet, 'Political Democracy.'

45   Marsha Pripstein Posusney, 'The Middle East's Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective', in Pripstein Posusney & Angrist (eds.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East*, pp. 1-18: p. 7.

46   Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Democratization in the Middle East: the evidence from Syria' in Gerd Nonneman (ed.), *Political and Economic Liberalization: Dynamics and Linkages in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996), pp. 153-167: esp. pp. 155-156; see also Waterbury, 'Democracy without Democrats?', pp. 29-30.

47   Tatu Vanhanen & Richard Kimber, 'Predicting and Explaining Democratization in Eastern Europe', in Pridham & Vanhanen (eds.), *Democratization in Eastern Europe*, pp. 63-96, especially p. 67.

conditions, and because it plays a role in the nature of communications within and outside the polity in question. Changes in technology thus change the distribution of power resources; they were a critical part of the explanation for political change in Eastern Europe, where regimes 'were ultimately unable to control the consequences of technological change.'[48]

10.   What emerges from the above, then, is that economic development, literacy and urbanisation – i.e. socio-economic development – intertwine in a generally positive way with the evolution of civil society, with the growth of the middle class and bourgeoisie, and with the potential for liberalisation and democratisation.[49] This finds expression in Vanhanen & Kimber's Index of Power Resources, sketched earlier, and is confirmed by systematic comparative work. Once again, though, it is important to note that the compelling statistical evidence of these direct and indirect positive causal links does not make them deterministic: they are neither necessary nor sufficient explanations for democratization.[50]

11.   Where the economy (and the system as a whole) under the authoritarian phase was performing relatively well,   subsequent progression from opening-up to democratisation would appear to proceed more smoothly (in other cases upheaval may obtain, or, indeed, revolution).[51]

12.   There is no clear, linear short-term linkage between economic and political liberalisation: indeed, some kinds of domestic economic liberalisation may work simply to give room for selected domestic private interests while protecting them from outside competition. Even so, more far-reaching economic liberalisation can have several effects that boost the chances of democratisation (as Sklar puts it: 'market economies do stimulate the political organs of society'[52]): (1) it puts resources (and networking options) in the hands of private entrepreneurs (helping to foster an independent bourgeoisie), at the same time as removing resources from the state (one part of the 'Power Resources' landscape); (2) at least in its 21st-century incarnation (WTO) it introduces transparency requirements that limit the ability of regimes to obscure their use of national funds; and (3) it often imposes at least short-term pain on certain groups, who may therefore be more likely to demand a say.[53]

[48]   Pridham & Vanhanen, 'Conclusion', p. 261.

[49]   Lipset, *Political Man*; id., 'Some Social requisites for Democracy: Economic Development and Political legitimacy', in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53 (1959), No. 1, pp. 69-105.

[50]   See Doorenspleet, 'Political Democracy.' For the effect on civil society and, hence, on democratisation, see also Diamond, Linz & Lipset, 'Introduction: What makes for Democracy?', pp. 22-24, 30.

[51]   Tat Yan Kong, 'The Origins of Economic Liberalization and Democratization in South Korea', in Nonneman (ed.), *Political and Economic Liberalization*, pp. 229-244.

[52]   Richard Sklar, 'Towards a Theory of Developmental Democracy', in Adrian Leftwich ed.), *Democracy and Development* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), pp. 25-44: p. 39.

[53]   See Nonneman, 'Linkages Between Economic and Political Liberalization', in Nonneman (ed.), *Political and Economic Liberalization: Dynamics and Linkages in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996), pp. 307-313.

13.　Cultural factors, and in particular political culture, may play a role: indeed, elite and mass political culture – itself an evolving accretion of historical and other influences – has been recognised both as an important factor in its own right, and as an intervening variable in how other factors discussed here affect liberalisation and democratisation.[54] A culture of deference will tend to slow the emergence of effective, large-scale politically organised movement for reform; the same goes for a cultural preference for communal cohesion and stability over individual rights, as Pye has argued for the case of Asia.[55] But examples abound that this does not constitute an immovable obstacle: Diamond, Linz & Lipset – sympathetic to the notion of political culture as a factor – conclude from a wide range of case studies that 'It is misleading … to infer too much from the contours of a country's political culture at any particular point in time. … [P]olitical culture … is plastic and malleable over time. [It] is not destiny.'[56] The case of Latin America's escape from authoritarianism, and the experience of Taiwan, Korea, and Thailand, among others, show us as much – and in the process also demonstrate that 'religious' culture (be it Buddhist, Ibero-Catholic, or Confucian) is a similarly inadequate predictor. Religion in its own right (as opposed to particular socio-politically shaped emanations) is a factor that is neither an inherent inhibitor or driver for change.[57] It is, however, clear that a political culture featuring social pluralism, as well as pragmatism and a tradition of compromise, offers more immediately fertile ground for the emergence of democratic practice.[58]

Political culture is subject to the diffusion of ideas – as with the spread of democratic ideas from the French Revolution onwards, and as illustrated in cases in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America.[59] Huntington and Schmitter, among others, have made the case that such diffusion (or 'contagion') tends to have the strongest effect when countries are 'geographically proximate and culturally similar'.[60]

One important constituent variable in shaping political culture is colonial experience – either because in a few cases long-established colonial administration imparted both the structures and a long-term aspiration to democracy as a goal, or because in the absence of such a tradition, emerging elite politics and wider political mobilisation were strongly shaped by the anti-colonial struggle rather than by any particular concern with pluralism or democratic governance. In the latter case, once state structures were captured by a post-colonial leadership, politics often continued to be

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[54]　See for instance Larry Diamond, 'Political Culture and Democracy', in Diamond (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994), pp. 1-27.

[55]　Lucian Pye & Mary Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: the Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Harvard University Press, 1985).

[56]　Diamond, Linz & Lipset, 'Introduction', p. 21.

[57]　Also see ibid., and Diamond, 'Causes and effects', in Diamond (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries,* pp. 229-249: p. 236.

[58]　For a survey of the literature, see Diamond, 'Introduction', pp. 10-15.

[59]　See also Diamond, 'Causes and Effects', pp. 237-238.

[60]　Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 102; Schmitter, 'The International Context.'

driven by this tradition as well as by the tendency for control of the state apparatus to be viewed as a means to ensure group or personal power, wealth and security.[61]

14. The external environment can have a crucial impact: in terms of ideas (political, economic) from the surrounding region or beyond ('Zeitgeist'); in terms of the attitudes of particular outside actors which can inhibit or enhance the chances of political change; and in terms of the international political economy and the position of the country in question in it. The very fact of globalisation – economic and political – tends to diminish the freedom of action regimes have and increases the pressures (and interests) for economic openness and transparency. Yet these external factors are not, in the main, a sufficient condition: they cannot by themselves explain instances of far-reaching liberalisation or democratisation. With some problematic exceptions such as Afghanistan and Iraq, the external factors tend to work through (or are effective if joining with) domestic dynamics, such as an active civil society; they also may affect political culture in the longer term.[62]

15. More generally, pre-existing regime types do seem to matter, both in terms of whether they are likely to allow openings to begin, and in terms of how smoothly liberalisation and democratisation proceed thereafter.[63]

16. This would seem a logical consequence from the realisation that elites' and ruler's calculations and actions do matter – albeit not to the almost exclusive degree that some elite theorists have suggested. In the end, it is not just actors and movements in society at large that are shaping developments under the influence of all of the factors listed above: it is also the perceptions, political culture, calculations, and, finally, decisions of the elites, and of the ruling regimes in particular, that are crucial in co-determining what happens.

Once again, then, both agency and structure matter; both material interests and ideational factors matter – but so do short-term conjunctural or unpredictable factors ('events' and circumstances), the historical paths trodden by the societies and states in question, and their

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[61] See Christopher Clapham, *Africa in the International System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert Pinkney, *Democracy in the Third World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), pp. 40-48; Diamond, 'Introduction', pp. 15-17; Naomi Chazan, 'Between Liberalization and Statism: African Political Cultures and Democracy', in Diamond (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries*, pp. 59-98.

[62] Philippe Schmitter, 'The International Context of Contemporary Democratisation', in *Stanford Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, (1993), no. 1, pp. 1-29; Gerd Nonneman, 'Patterns of Political Liberalization: Explanations and Modalities', in Nonneman (ed.), *Political and Economic Liberalization*, pp. 45-62: pp. 53-55; Diamond, 'Causes and Effects', pp. 237-238 (on the international diffusion effects on political culture); Geoffrey Pridham (ed.), *Encouraging Democracy: The International Context of Regime transition in Southern Europe* (London: St Martin's Press, 1991); Geoffrey Pridham & Tatu Vanhanen (eds.), *Democratization in Eastern Europe: Domestic and International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1994); Diamond, Linz & Lipset,. 'Introduction', pp. 48-52; and Samual Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

[63] Nonneman, 'Patterns of Political Liberalization', pp. 54-55.

external environments. The key insight should perhaps be that none of these factors is deterministic, and none of the different levels of explanation can work in isolation.[64]

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[64]   This is a view arrived at also by Pridham & Vanhanen, 'Conclusion'.

6.0   KEY FACTORS RELEVANT TO LIBERALISATION IN THE GCC STATES

Much of the above is directly and obviously relevant to the GCC states. Let us focus in particular on those that seem to stand out. For the sake of convenience I divide them below into (1) Development, economic change, wealth and the middle class; (2) Civil society; (3) State and regime types; (4) External factors; (5) Cultural factors and political culture. Clearly, these categories overlap and interlink: it precisely is in their varying combinations and interlinkages that they achieve explanatory power.

6.1.   Development, economic change, wealth and the middle class

It is clear that society as a whole and the economy in particular have been changing enormously in the past few decades: polities and the economic systems they house have become incomparably larger and more complex. This has been significant in several respects:

   i.   it has, as already suggested, made traditional or neo-traditional mechanisms of consultation and access between ruled and rulers insufficient by themselves, leading to the necessity, and in some cases the demand, for more effective mechanisms.[65]

   ii.   While initially leading to an increased hold of the state through rentier dynamics and resources, these changes also brought two other phenomena: (a) from the mid-1980s, a relative downturn in the demands/resources equation, something which even with current high oil prices remains an issue except for Qatar and the UAE; and (b) a very gradual build-up of resources in the hands of wider society, increasingly visible from the 1990s – resources which, regardless of their initial roots in state distribution of rent, nevertheless became something that in turn allowed some groups to acquire some room for autonomous action. This has been shown for the case of Kuwait by Mary Ann Tetreault,[66] and is especially relevant with regard to the question of the bourgeoisie in these states.

Indeed, Giacomo Luciani has shown that Saudi Arabia has been witnessing the emergence of a genuine bourgeoisie of about half a million people that is no longer quite so dependent on the state and that is involved in the production of value added – not merely accessing and circulating rent.[67] They base their now significant degree of autonomy on very extensive wealth acquired initially largely from state expenditure but increasingly from productive investment and commercial activity – wealth that has in any case become a factor in its own right not dependent on government distribution.

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[65]   See also Nonneman, *Governance, Human Rights, and the case for Political Adaptation in the Gulf*, pp. 13-18.

[66]   M. Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy*.

[67]   Giacomo Luciani, 'From private Sector to National Bourgeoisie: Saudi Business' in Aarts & Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance*, pp. 144-181.

A further factor related to the wealth of these polities is that it may make political liberalisation easier and less threatening: it can help absorb some of the worst social grievances and may give regimes a window of opportunity, during which opening up the system need not lead to calls for their removal. This is compatible with Lipset's suggestion that political competition in wealthier societies is likely to be less fierce, allowing for a more consensual form of politics.[68]

By the same token one may note the possible parallel with other cases of democratisation that indicate that where the economy under the authoritarian phase was relatively well run, subsequent democratisation processes may run more smoothly.

There is a key further aspect of economic change that impacts on the potential for political change: the growing pressures of economic globalisation, combined with the desire of these states to be part of the WTO, and also with the domestic aim of achieving a measure of sustainable economic diversification, are all bringing greater pressures for economic liberalisation. The consequences that this can have for political change are as valid for the GCC states as elsewhere: the demands of increased competitiveness lead to the rentier social contract being undermined (as more is demanded from the national workforce) and the increased transparency required under WTO rules and international reporting requirements mean that financial management becomes more visible and open to scrutiny and protest, while the state's mechanisms for political distribution of rents become constrained.

Literacy, education and urbanisation – factors recognised as highly significant in the general literature on democratisation[69] – have all increased dramatically in the GCC states over the past generation, and hence would point to a greater propensity to reform. It is true that, on their own, such factors are not necessarily a predictor for democratisation, at least in the short-to-medium term, as the case of other Arab states shows: these indicators have been rising fast also in those states, without a concomitant movement up the democratisation scale.[70]

Information and technology too have changed beyond recognition in the past half-century. Information has expanded exponentially, in particular through IT and other communications technology, and has thus exposed people increasingly to international and regional events and developments.[71] More broadly, technological development has had effects not only in this arena but throughout the economy and society, creating longer-term trends of change as seen elsewhere, and thus affecting most of the other categories of factors discussed here.

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[68]   Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites for Democracy'.
[69]   For instance Philippe Schmitter, 'Introduction'; Vanhanen & Kimber, 'Predicting and Explaining Democratization in Eastern Europe'; Nonneman, 'Patterns of Political Liberalization.'
[70]   Waterbury, 'Democracy without Democrats?', p. 24.
[71]   See the special issue of the *Arab Reform Bulletin* (Carnegie Endowment), December 2004, Volume 2, Issue 11, on http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/_index.cfm?fa=view&id=16242; and Giacomo Luciani, 'Democracy vs Shura in the age of the internet', in Khalaf & Luciani (eds.), *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, pp. 274-297.

6.2. Civil society

Much of the above has a direct – both short- and long-term – impact on the nature and functioning of civil society. Civil society, as a consequence of many of the above factors and dynamics, has unquestionably been expanding and strengthening.[72] But it should be noted that this has gone hand-in-hand with already existing local forms of organisation between the private/family level and that of the state. Kuwait, in the work of Longva and Tetreault, has been the most studied example (with, among other manifestations, the *diwaniyya*),[73] but forms of organised civil society life have increased in most of these states (least in Oman) in the form of journalists' associations, political groupings or platforms (even if not yet called parties), women's organisations, etc. They remain, of course, constrained, but nevertheless offer a greater potential base for political reform trends than has been the case. To some extent the expression of civil society is connected to the growth of the middle class, with an intelligentsia and a bourgeoisie – factors already discussed above. It may also be influenced by some of the features of state and regime types discussed below, as well as by 'culture' and, arguably, external factors – both discussed at the end of this section.

6.3. State and regime types: It's not just Rent

Of course, these states do to a large extent remain rentier states, and regimes continue to derive from this a significant degree of autonomy and an ability to engage in 'group formation'. But, in addition to the observations under section *6.1.* above, which show that 'post-rentier' dynamics are emerging, four further, partly interrelated, features of these states and regimes could be put forward to underpin the argument that they might be more amenable to political evolution than has long been assumed of such supposedly 'anachronistic' and 'rentier' systems, and also more than 'republican' Arab systems.

i. *Basic-level legitimacy of the states and the ruling families, deriving both from the local roots of these states, and from elements of traditional legitimacy.* There is a measure of local legitimacy for these polities, as they did not have to face the struggle faced by many of the regimes in suddenly and artificially created states throughout the Middle East and North Africa, where fierce nationalist and militarist assertion against domestic as well as outside actors became the norm. Even if most of the GCC states arguably owe their continued existence (and in some cases their recognition as separate polities) to protection by Britain, the latter built on local political realities. The elements of traditional legitimacy for the ruling families are linked to the above factor, and to continued rule by the founding families of these polities – a rule which consciously uses elements of tradition. The consequence of this is not simply that there is a less urgent

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[72]　Jill Schwedler, *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Augustus Richard Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, vols. 1 & 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1994, 1995); Crystal & al-Shayeji, 'The pro-democracy Agenda in Kuwait'; and Anh Nga Longva, 'Citizenship in the Gulf States: conceptualization and practice', in Nils Butenschon et al (eds.) *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 179-197. For an interesting study of civil society in the UAE, see Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates*, Chapter 5: 'Globalization and the Prospects for Civil Society', pp. 251-292.

[73]　Longva, 'Citizenship in the Gulf States'; Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy*.

demand for political change, but also, once again, that regimes have less reason to fear that allowing some measure of reform need lead to upheaval and perhaps their overthrow.

ii.   Except for the Saudi case, *these are small polities*, featuring *strong personal, kinship and other social networks* that cut across ideological and economic cleavages. Change may be more easily manageable here. Most key political actors will often know each other, and personal, family or social links will often connect even those who are political opponents. Such links and networks tend to take some of the edge off political conflict – arguably making for evolutionary rather than revolutionary responses to tensions. The impact of smallness on political climate has been identified by Springborg and Salamé, among others: small societies invite political participation, and their rulers can hardly suppress the intrinsic plurality by reference to some great regional leadership vision.[74] They also potentially provide a more conducive environment for the emergence of 'political moderation and accommodation at the mass level' which the earlier work of Almond, Verba and Lipset suggested are 'facilitated by structural patterns of social interaction that bring people together regularly across major social and political cleavages'[75] – something arguably facilitated further by cultural features such as the pattern of kinship ties cutting across class cleavages, the importance of personal relations, and social institutions such as the *majlis* and the *diwaniyya*. One key part of this is the nature of interactions at the elite level. Dahl suggested that the important ingredient of a political culture that features moderation, pragmatism, and cooperation, has most successfully been developed where, as in Sweden and Britain, 'the rules, the practices and the culture of competitive politics developed first among a small elite [connected by] ties of friendship, family, interest, class, and ideology', which kept conflict manageable, before these practices and rules were gradually expanded to wider society.[76] Arguably the GCC states' elites provide the right environment for such interactions.

iii.   *They are monarchies*: while this, too, has long been considered a feature predisposing a system to either immobilism or revolution, the evidence from the Middle East as well as elsewhere has in fact pointed the other way. Not only have Middle Eastern monarchies proved very resilient,[77] Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar have shown that political liberalisation and adaptation are anything but alien to these systems. Republican but autocratic presidents claiming ideological legitimacy, must almost inevitably fall when their particular system and ideology is challenged either by a rival or by

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[74]   Patricia Springborg, 'Politics, Primordialism and Orientalism', in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, no. 1 (March 1986), pp. 185-211; Ghassan Salamé, 'Small is Pluralistic', in Salamé (ed.), *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: IB Tauris, 1994), pp. 84-111.

[75]   As summarised by Diamond, 'Introduction', p. 11.

[76]   Dahl, *Polyarchy*, pp. 36-37; Also Gabriel Almond & Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

[77]   See Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *Middle East Monarchies: the Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000); especially the article by Lisa Anderson, 'Dynasts and Nationalists: Why Middle Eastern Monarchies survive' (pp. 53-69). Also Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

democratisation.[78] By contrast, a monarchy may (re)fashion itself as above politics and survive democratisation – especially if it is the main agent of such change and thus derives added legitimacy from it (the cases of Spain and Bahrain are instructive here). Moreover, the *social* pluralism that has always been present and even encouraged in the small Gulf monarchies in particular, has in many ways been a factor in such dynamics, presided over, segmentally connected to or co-opted by the ruling family.[79]

iv.   A final, related factor that may cut both ways, is the extent to which these *societies and polities are structured on 'corporatist', or 'segmented clientelist' lines.*[80]   On the one hand, of course, this has been argued to constitute a brake on real reform, as the entrenched (and actively reproduced) vertical divisions into 'corpora' or 'segments' leads both to potential opposition remaining divided and to the state (the ruling family) creating or maintaining separate relationships of patronage. On the other hand, however, it means (1) that an element of pluralism is already an inherent and accepted part of the system (this goes alongside the accepted 'social pluralism' that characterises monarchies as opposed to many a republican ideology-based system, as argued above); (2) that measures of liberalisation are likely to reinforce this without leading the regime to fear united opposition – indeed some 'segments' of this socially plural patchwork may become de facto supporters of the wider system; and (3) that, therefore, this factor too may lead to the view that political liberalisation measures can be a useful means of political 'decompression',[81] pre-empting domestic or external criticism, and building new support bases.[82]

Of course, inherent in some of these factors is that it is political *liberalisation*, rather than fully-fledged *democratisation*, that the regimes may intend, and indeed that it is precisely because the danger of the former leading to a wholesale change of the system is low, that they are prepared to open up in the first place. I return to that question below.

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[78]   Daniel Brumberg, 'Authoritarian Legacies and Reform Strategies in the Arab World', in Brynen, Korany & Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization & Democratization in the Arab World*, Vol. 1, pp. 229-260.

[79]   See Lisa Anderson, 'Dynasts and nationalists: why Middle Eastern monarchies survive'; Abdulhadi Khalaf, 'What do Gulf Ruling families do when they Rule?' in *Orient*, Vol. 44 (20034), no. 4, pp. 537-554; and the review article by Russell Lucas, 'Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type', in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36 (2004), pp. 103-119.

[80]   The concept of 'segmented clientelism' was introduced by Steffen Hertog, 'Segmented Clientelism: The Political Economy of Saudi Economic reform Efforts,' in Aarts & Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance*, pp. 111-143.

[81]   Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Calculated Decompression as a substitute for Democratization: Syria', in Korany, Brynen & Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Vol. 2 – Comparative Experiences*, pp. 223-240.

[82]   See also Lucas, 'Monarchical Authoritarianism.'

6.4. External factors

Gause has argued that the survival and continued authoritarian control of Gulf monarchies – and by implication their ability to resist pressures for political liberalisation – must be explained largely with reference to external protection. [83] I have already pointed to the importance of the external factor in the shaping and consolidation of these regimes, but by the same token this clearly cannot be a sufficient explanation. Indeed, not only does it appear to be precisely in some of these Western-allied regimes that reforms *are* taking place; more stringent authoritarianism in fact characterises several republican systems that do not benefit from any major such external support; and several of those monarchical regimes that did fall by the wayside were supported by the US and the West – in fact they fell in part precisely because of that close Western link. We do, therefore, need to keep a prime focus on the domestic environment: as already suggested at the beginning of both this and the previous section, the external factor can either facilitate or obstruct political liberalisation, not determine outcomes on its own. [84]

Clearly the GCC regimes cannot count on quite the same level of unquestioned support and protection regardless of domestic arrangements, that characterised the relationship with the West during the Cold war; by the same token, there has been a significantly higher level of proactive pressure from the US and, in different ways, the EU over the question of political reform. The latter of course, is limited in three ways: (1) the outside world has less leverage over these regimes than over poorer states;[85] (2) overly brusque forms of pressure, especially combined with the lack of credibility from which the US in particular suffers in the region, may be counter-productive and also may be easily dismissed domestically; and (3) the EU's level of clear and united commitment to its stated aim of fostering democratisation and good governance is open to question, to say the least[86]. Even so, there is unquestionably a greater level of outside pressure both from specific actors and in wider, 'Zeitgeist' terms.

This is combined with economic globalisation and the desire of these states to enter the WTO for both economic and prestige reasons. The potential political consequences have already been dealt with above: they are neither straightforward nor certain, but they certainly act to limit a regime's array and extent of economic resources to be deployed in pursuit of political ends, they place relatively more such resources in the hands of actors in society, they necessitate relatively greater transparency, and, through the demands economic competitiveness places on the workforce (compared to the ideal-type rentier social contract) they almost inevitably generate a greater desire for a say in how the economy and the polity are run.

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[83] Gregory Gause, 'The Persistence of Monarchy in the Arabian Peninsula', in Kostiner (ed.), *Middle East Monarchies*, pp. 167-186.

[84] This is also the strong thrust of the argument put forward by Abdulaziz Sager, 'Political Reform Measures from a Domestic GCC Perspective', in Khalaf & Luciani, *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, pp. 17-32.

[85] See also Nonneman, *Governance, Human Rights and the Case for Political Adaptation in the Gulf*, p. 19.

[86] Gerd Nonneman, *EU-GCC Relations: Dynamics, Patterns and Perspectives*, Gulf Papers Series, (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, June 2006).

The *regional* environment is important in a variety of ways.[87] The effects can either enhance or inhibit the prospects for political reform; they can do so either by affecting elites' perceptions and calculations, or by influencing popular perceptions and aspirations; and they can arise from, and affect, both material facts/interests, and ideas. With regard to the latter, it is worth remembering Huntington's and Schmitter's suggestion that 'demonstration' or 'contagion' effects tend to be strongest among 'geographically proximate and culturally similar' countries – something that is of particular importance in the case of the Arab world.[88]

In the case of the GCC states, events in the wider region – including most prominently in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon, have been making their influence felt, along with the ever present (but variously interpreted) shadow of Iran. On the one hand, some of these developments have raised fears over the effects of political openings and especially steps towards democratisation. Both ruling families and moderate reformist elites among the Sunni populations inevitably became concerned by the triple apparent risks of chaos (as in Iraq), a take-over of radical Islamist forces, and the rise of the Shia as a divisive factor in their own polities (heightened by the concern over links with Iran).[89]

On the other hand, there can be little doubt that the example of the genuine elections with mass participation in Palestine and Iraq, and the effects of 'people power' in Lebanon, may inspire sections of the population (not least, indeed, the Shia, but by no means only them), by showing that, whatever the pitfalls, popular power is not a complete chimera, nor simply a Western imposition. In this context it is perhaps of particular importance that the *Sunni* politicians of Hamas in Palestine have set a highly significant precedent, with, moreover, clear evidence of a shift towards pluralism in that organisation. If allowed to succeed, this might yet create one of the most important demonstration effects of all – as Alastair Crooke has argued.[90] Yet even in Iraq, the continued Sunni insurgency and the rejectionist position of the hardline would-be Sunni representative organisation of the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq should not obscure the fact that neither was able to stop Sunni Iraqis participating in large numbers in the elections for the first permanent parliament. Moreover, even the Association is not against elections in principle (only 'under occupation'), and important Sunni organisations, politicians and religious leaders have come to support the new democratizing model.[91] Reliable surveys of how these factors changed perceptions at the popular level in the GCC are still lacking – this is one obvious area for future research,

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[87]   See also Gregory Gause, 'Regional Influences on Experiments in Political Liberalization in the Arab World', in Brynen, Korany & Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization & Democratization in the Arab World*, Vol. 1, pp. 283-306.

[88]   Huntington, *The Third Wave*, p. 102; and Schmitter, 'The International Context', pp. 18-19.

[89]   These fears are, in various ways, expressed frequently by ruling family members and middle class reformists alike, both in a number of official comments (especially by Saudi princes) and in informal discussions. Author's interviews and off-the-record discussions in a number of GCC states, and with nationals of all six states, 2003-2006. See also Toby Jones, 'The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Report*, No. 237, Winter 2005, pp. 20-25.

[90]   Alastair Crooke, 'Talking to Hamas', *Prospect Magazine*, June 2006 (also http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=7481).

[91]   Roel Meijer, 'The Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq', *Middle East Report*, no, 237, Winter 2005, pp. 12-19.

however difficult – but there is no reason to assume that regional developments will not add to the pressures from below.

6.5. Cultural factors?

A discussion of 'cultural' factors is problematic in several regards: it is hard to define what 'culture' is, and the category inevitably contains a host of different features and attitudes, differing among the populations and often competing within groups and individuals; culture – whether local, national, or regional, and whether 'social', 'religious', or 'political' is always in flux and being created. Certainly *political* culture – but not only it – is also constantly shaped not only by history but by the other categories of factors discussed above.

It has been argued that 'Islam' could be an inhibitor for democratisation. This argument is weak. Firstly, Islam as a category is multifarious – far more so than such arguments assume, and is only 'essentialised' at one's peril. Secondly, there is considerable work by Muslim political thinkers past and present that points in the opposite direction.[92] Thirdly, various Islamist opposition groups are demanding a greater say – even if not necessarily proposing a democratic style of government themselves, but in some cases doing exactly that.[93] And fourthly, the evidence of other Islamic countries (not least Indonesia, Turkey and Malaysia) is that Islam as such poses no obstacle; indeed, some of the most recent and most extensive comparative research based on the World Values Survey shows that 'residents of predominantly Muslim states voice democratic support at levels similar to residents of other countries [and] … greater support than residents of the former Soviet nations of East Europe.'[94] The extent to which particular interpretations of religious frameworks have inhibited political reform, therefore, depends on the socio-political domestic and external context within which such interpretations have evolved.[95] In this context, the election and evolution of (Sunni) Hamas, as well as, more tentatively, the evolving situation in Iraq as

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[92] See Gudrun Krämer, 'Islam and Pluralism, in Brynen, Korany & Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization & Democratization in the Arab World*, Vol. 1, pp. 6-128 ; Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Timothy Sisk, *Islam and Democracy* (USIP Press, 1992).

[93] In April 2006, the Muslim Brotherhood's deputy supreme guide, Muhammad Habib, posted a plea on the organisation's website calling on political parties, syndicates, and associations in the Arab world 'to acknowledge that comprehensive reform can only be achieved through a political reform process based on the notions of pluralism, peaceful rotation of power, free and fair elections, and separation of powers' (as paraphrased by *Arab Reform Bulletin*, April 2006, Vol. 4, issue 3, on http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/_index.cfm?fa=view&id=18233. For the original in Arabic see the Brotherhood's website Ikhwanonline, on http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ID=19414&SectionID=113.

[94] Daniel Thope & Katherine Meyer, 'Religion and Democratic Support: Evidence from the World Survey', in *Democracy & Society*, Vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1 & 10-12.

[95] Katerina Dalacoura, *Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights* (London: IB Tauris, 1998); Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 1988); Ayubi, 'Islam and Democracy', in David Potter et al. (eds.), *Democratization* (Polity Press, 1997), pp. 345-366; Augustus Richard Norton, Norton, A, 'The challenge of inclusion in the Middle East', in *Current History*, January 1995, pp. 1-6; Waterbury presents a more equivocal picture: Waterbury, 'Democracy without Democrats?' A balanced overview is given in Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islam and Politics in the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), Chapter 4: 'The Democracy Debate', pp. 88-117.

discussed in the previous sub-section, could turn out to be highly significant: not only because they tell us something about how different forms of 'Islamic political culture' may evolve, but because such evolutions elsewhere in the region are also likely to have a 'diffusion' or 'contagion' effect as noted above – including in the GCC.

Even so, other cultural factors (in part influencing the above) may play a role – including a tradition of deference, and the strength of kinship and tribal values as an organising principle of society and the polity.[96] Hisham Sharabi and Saad Eddin Ibrahim, amongst others, have argued that the stress on obedience to authority in Arab culture and society – from the family upwards – has at least partly shaped political culture and indeed political dynamics.[97] That this is not, however, a necessary or immutable block on democratic or liberalising demands, is demonstrated by the strength of such demands and active mobilising behind them in Bahrain and Kuwait. Indeed, the evidence from the Arab world (as for the wider Muslim world) is that 'issues of democracy are well established in Arab political discourse,'[98] even if they are by no means dominant. Of course regimes have used and played on such features of local culture to shore up their own rule.

By contrast, other features of local culture may potentially work in favour of liberalization and democratization. The cross-cutting personal, kinship and other social networks already referred to under point *6.3.* (ii) above, allowing a pattern of elite bargaining and competition to evolve avoiding crisis or real strife, and the extent to which this may be more easily extended to wider society in very small polities, is one such element. Another links into political history: as noted earlier, both in the rest of the Middle East and elsewhere, colonial experience was an important constituent variable in subsequent political culture. The GCC states here provide an obvious exception: although Britain's (and later the US's) presence were certainly an important factor helping to shape states and regimes, they were never colonised. The radicalising effect that some forms of colonisation have often proved to have on subsequent political cultures therefore also remained absent (the case of South Yemen provides an illuminating contrast here). By the same token, of course, there also was never the long-established colonial tradition, and hence direct experience, of pluralist practice that a country like India enjoyed, nor the consequent internalised aim of democratic organisation of the independent polity.

Political culture as a factor of course links into that of 'civil society' and into other factors discussed above: it both influences and may be changed by them. This is as true in the states of the GCC as it is elsewhere – and both global and regional 'diffusion', 'demonstration' or 'contagion' effects may contribute to it.

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[96]   Waterbury, 'Democracy without Democrats?'; Michael Hudson, 'The Political Culture Approach to Arab Democratization: The Case for Bringing It Back In, Carefully', in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives*, pp. 61-76.

[97]   Sharabi, *Neo-patriarchy*; Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Al Mujtama' wa-d-dawla fi-l watan al-'arabi* (Beirut, 1988).

[98]   Salwa Ismail, 'Democracy in Contemporary Arab Intellectual Discourse', in Brynen, Korany and Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives*, pp. 93-111.

7.0 THE LIMITS TO GULF OPENINGS: LIBERALISATION WITHOUT DEMOCRATISATION?

It is clear, then, that some significant changes have been taking place in the GCC states, and that these can at least in part be explained by reference to some of the theoretical and comparative insights laid out above. Does this, however, mean that these changes have a longer-term character? Does it make them more than top-down liberalisation measures that can be reversed, or at least can be stopped from leading any further on the road towards democratization – defined as 'political participation, accountability, and pluralism'? Indeed, does it mean that in some of these states reforms can be anything more than cosmetic? Where, for instance, does the paradox of wealth take us? Towards the conclusions suggested by modernization theorists, or towards those of the rentier state theorists?

It is true that wealth and some of the other regime strengths enumerated above mean that there will be temporarily less pressure to democratise in such systems. But my argument is that when, as pressures inevitably rise, it *does* become judged necessary to adjust the system, these regimes have the flexibility to adapt without risking either chaos or the overthrow of the monarchy. They are less brittle, in other words, than regimes such as Saddam Hussein's (and several other Arab republican systems). They are, also, not trapped in the legacy of populist authoritarianism and grand ideological claims that have typified such republican regimes.[99]

Whether they do adapt depends, of course, on a decision by the monarch and the ruling family. Yet it would appear that some recognition of the need to adapt is present among most of the royal families in the Gulf: the leaderships of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar seem to be furthest ahead in acting on this recognition and taking advantage of the window of opportunity that exists. The organisation of municipal elections in Saudi Arabia was a further sign of such recognition. And so are the tentative moves in Oman and the UAE. Elite choices are as crucial here, in other words, as in most other cases of democratization that did not come about by revolution (and arguably there as well, through regime *mis*calculation).[100]

7.1. Evidence for the limits to reform

By the same token, there is also plenty of evidence that rulers do intend to control any change and generally do intend to limit its extent. In *Saudi Arabia*, the municipal elections did not impart any real power to those elected beyond functional matters of local importance, and they were balanced by the half of the councils that were appointed; all of the key powers remain in the hands of the royal family. In *Kuwait*, the Al Sabah remains the ultimate arbiter and continues to dominate successive cabinets, while the formation of political parties remains outside the law. In *Bahrain*, the King introduced a second, appointed chamber with

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[99] Brumberg, 'Authoritarian Legacies and Reform Strategies in the Arab World'.
[100] Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter & Laurence Whitehead (eds.), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: prospects for Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Dahl, *Polyarchy*; Rustow, 'Transitions to Democracy'.

equal powers into the constitution, thus ensuring a large measure of control (and causing the Shia opposition to boycott the 2002 elections).

In the *UAE* there is thus far no real participatory mechanism at all – except in a functional and consultative way when it comes to the business community in Dubai, in the manner of the relationship between a CEO and managers/investors. The impact of Shaikh Khalifa's announcement at the end of 2005 that the FNC's size and powers were to be expanded, remains unclear: there is nothing to stop the emirate councils that will elect part of the FNC from themselves being appointed, rather than elected; nor is there much likelihood of the new FNC being allowed really to hold the key royal decision-makers to account, or block their main wishes. The seven Amirs, at any rate, remain the sovereign arbiters of the law and political dispensation within their own emirates.[101]

In *Qatar*, the provision for elections in the new constitution has yet to be implemented: expectations that elections would be held in 2004 have been adjusted to 2007. In addition, statements by the two key people – the Amir and the Foreign Minister – have become markedly more cautious: strong language continues to be used about the need for democratisation and the need to make this happen on a clear timetable, but at the same time, the way in which this was filled in, from 2005, has failed to be at all specific about such a schedule, while simultaneously introducing comments about making sure the implementation of reforms was compatible with local circumstances.[102] Similarly, 2004 saw the introduction of a law that severely constrained workers' ability to organise or take strike action, and in 2005 the new Associations Law made clear that societies will not be allowed to deal with political issues and all their activities, including fundraising, will be monitored by the ministry of Civil Service Affairs and Housing. In any case, with one-third of the 45-member parliament to be appointed by the Amir, and a 2/3 majority needed to vote out ministers or to overturn Amiri decrees issued when parliament is not in session, parliamentary power remains significantly hemmed in.

In *Oman*, the elected *Majlis al-Shura* is balanced by the appointed State Council and by the limited purview of members' powers (apart from Defence, National Security and Foreign Affairs, Finance is also excluded from its remit, and it cannot initiate, only comment on legislation). Any discussion of further opening up takes place self-consciously in a context where all key decisions are ultimately dependent on the Sultan's word; this finds expression in the reluctance of Assembly members fully to exercise the powers they do have. The limited perceived relevance of the *Majlis* may have been one reason for the relatively low voter registration for the first universal elections in 2003 (262,000 out of 800,000 eligible).[103]

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[101]   Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates*.

[102]   E.g. the statements of the Amir and the Foreign Minister at the 5th Doha Conference on Democracy and Free Trade, Doha, April 2005, and the Foreign Minister's response to questions.

[103]   Findings confirmed through a series of off-the-record discussions with officials, observers, business people and members of both councils, in Oman, 2003-2004. See also Peterson, 'The Emergence of Post-Traditional Oman.' The observation that the assembly does not use all its current powers was also made in comments by Muhammad al-Mazrui, Secretary-General of the UAE's Federal National Council, at the Gulf Research Centre Conference on 'The Gulf in a Year', Dubai: Grand Hyatt, January 2005.

In light of the above qualifications to current reform initiatives, and my earlier arguments for why regimes may rightly feel that liberalisation would not entail regime change but could instead be a useful instrument of political decompression, there is a *prima facie* case for accepting Brumberg's argument that what we are witnessing is intrinsically limited to the production of 'liberalised autocracy.'[104] In this view, what is happening is no more than the securing of the autocratic systems in a different garb, with greater room for the expression of social and some political pluralism but ultimate control remaining in the hands of the rulers, in order to take the domestic and external pressure off regimes.

Indeed, for the monarchies of the GCC liberalisation may not only take the sting out of immediate pressures, but may in effect serve as a 'divide-and-rule' tactic, under which the opposition or its various strands become 'submerged' in a more diverse number of social groups now given access to a limited form of political participation. The various groups and representatives may both acquire a stake in the system and continue, separately, to seek the ear and favour of the monarch, who remains the ultimate arbiter and source of authority.

So reform and liberalisation do not equate to democratisation – nor do they necessarily lead to it. The constraints referred to above mirror factors that elsewhere, and especially across the Middle East, have been recognised as obstructing moves beyond the limits of 'liberalising' or 'modernising autocracy', or 'political decompression': i.e. moving beyond the stage where reform and liberalisation is in essence no more than a tool used by the regime to maintain ultimate control[105]. Three central and intimately interrelated factors are:
- evolving variants of rentierism (intertwined with segmented clientelism in the Saudi case, and more generally corporatist features);
- the limited and particular character of civil society with its own divisions, not least between an arguably illiberal majority and a liberal minority (even if both want a greater say and greater transparency); and
- a middle class lacking a united political purpose.

It is especially in such an environment that regimes may use liberalisation to co-opt and/or divide actual and potential opposition forces most successfully, without intending to cede their position as the ultimate source of authority. Brumberg has argued that, in fact, the longer such 'liberalised autocracy' is practised, the harder it may be to move to real democratisation; as he puts it: 'the very success of liberalized autocracy can become a trap for even the most well-intentioned leader.'[106]

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[104]   Daniel Brumberg, 'The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy', in Larry Diamond et al (eds.), *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 35-47; and id., 'Liberalization versus democracy: Understanding Arab Political Reform' (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, May 2003 [Working Papers, Middle East Series, no. 37]).

[105]   The term 'decompression' was introduced by Hinnebusch for the case of Syrian instances of liberalisation but given wider relevance (Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Calculated Decompression as a Substitute for Democratisation: Syria', in R. Brynen et al (eds.), *Political Liberalization & Democratization in the Arab World*, Vol. 2 (Boulder: Lynne Rienner,1998), pp. 223-240. Bernard Lewis refers to 'modernizing autocracies' ('A Historical Overview', in Larry Diamond et al. (eds.), *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 208-219).

[106]   Brumberg, 'Liberalization versus Democracy,' p. 12.

To be sure, it is indeed possible that such will be the future of the GCC's political systems, and such is indeed likely to be the ruling families' intention. One might note, of course, that some parts of these states' societies would in fact welcome such an outcome, provided demands about greater transparency and good governance were met.

7.2.   A more positive spin?

Can these 'modernising autocracies' escape this trap? While it does seem probable that they will move further in the direction of liberalisation, it is not very likely that some, at least (including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman), will move beyond the confines of 'liberalized autocracy' for at least a generation. Even so, there are both generic and specific reasons to think that these polities need not *necessarily* remain trapped there.

The generic reasons include that, just as happened in Europe in transitions from absolutism, and in the more recent Latin American transitions from autocracy, limited moves made by ruling elites as a tactic of 'decompression,' can, in combination with growing pressures from below, lead such trends to slip beyond the control of what these elites originally intended, especially when alliances develop between key social groups and elements within the regime.[107] In some sense, this may already have begun to happen in Kuwait, and it may perhaps be in its initial stages in Bahrain. In Rustow's terms, Kuwait might be seen as in the phase of a 'pact' between rulers and political forces in society – the second of his three stages, having reached a stalemate in the first stage where the regime initially responds to pressures by tactical, polarizing use of democratizing gestures. It has not quite yet moved to the stage of 'habituation' which could bring more recognisably and sustainably democratic practice. Bahrain in these terms would perhaps just be crossing the boundary line between the first and second stages.[108]

Baaklini, Denoeux & Springborg, for the case of legislative politics in the Arab world, have suggested a slightly different scheme, which I interpret as starting from roughly the end of Rustow's first phase – i.e. when negotiated transition begins. The first stage is in essence a 'pact' (*al-mithaq*) (often officially referred to as such) between rulers and other groups; a second phase is 'national dialogue' (*al-hiwar*); this is in turn followed by the assertion of legislative authority (they accept, of course, that reversals are possible).[109] In these terms, I would place Kuwait well into the second phase; Bahrain just crossing from the first to the second; Qatar in an advanced version of the first; Saudi Arabia in the process of working out a *mithaq* (interestingly using a non-binding process formally labelled *hiwar watani* as a means to explore what a subsequent phase might involve); Oman in the very early stages of a *mithaq*-like situation; and the UAE, perhaps, just entering the first phase – although in the

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[107]   See Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*; Nonneman, 'Patterns of Political Liberalization', Hamilton & E. Kim, 'Economic and political liberalization in South Korea and Mexico.' This in essence is also the argument of Dankwart Rustow's three-phase progression from elites' tactical response to 'pacts' to 'habituation': Rustow, 'Transitions to Democracy.'

[108]   Rustow, 'Transitions to Democracy.'

[109]   Abdo Baaklini, Guilain Deneoux & Robert Springborg, *Legislative Politics in the Arab World: the resurgence of democratic institutions* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

latter case it should be noted that, as electoral politics are hardly the prime concern of the national population, perhaps we have an unstated, implicit *mithaq* here of a different nature.

In turn, the underlying cause for this evolution would be the combined effects of the changes wrought by economic and technological development, shifts in political culture, and changing political economies and class or group formation, which may over the longer term have the effect predicted by much of the theoretical and comparative literature reviewed earlier. The presence of an emerging national bourgeoisie holds out the possibility of deeper and longer-term reform dynamics emerging from below (or rather, from the 'middle') – at the same time giving outside actors interested in reform an 'entry point', especially when viewing the future potential for political reform through the prism of economic reform and development, in which this bourgeoisie must play a central role. Even if there is no consensus at all within these societies over where such reform should lead, the common factor is a desire for greater transparency and a greater say in some form.

To put it differently, the combined effects of a changing distribution of power resources and changing political cultures – both driven by domestic as well as external factors – may well eventually result in changing political dispensations that include significant elements of political participation, accountability and pluralism. Practices and institutions that are being gradually established may take on a life of their own: there has been some evidence of this with the judiciary in Egypt, the parliament in Kuwait, and indeed the internal, if cautious, drive towards a greater role in decision-making from within the *Majlis al-Shura* in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, as Ehteshami, and Baaklini *et al.* have suggested, even imperfect elections and hobbled parliaments may themselves increasingly add to civil society's tools and change the flavour of politics: even where the executive attempts to control them, parliaments often seem to contribute to the process of transition.[110] It is also conceivable that a key factor in other processes of democratisation – viz. allies for further reform emerging within the ruling elite – becomes a reality in the GCC states – indeed there are potential allies in all of them.

Yet the relatively higher levels of political and economic resources available to the regimes when compared to other non-democratic systems mean that this is indeed likely to be a long-term prospect, stretching well into the 21st century. Gradualism, in other words, is both likely and feasible. One is also reminded here, of course, of the notion proposed by Dahl, Almond & Verba, discussed earlier, that elite-level 'preparation' of democratic practice and 'culture,' has historically proved a useful basis for effective later adoption by other groups in society – even if the GCC states are neither Sweden nor Britain.[111]

It is true that, just as in the European precedent of centuries, there may be frequent setbacks when the regime attempts to reverse the tide. This indeed has been the pattern rightly identified, and feared for the future, by Brumberg. But that may not be a sustainable strategy in the long run, if those earlier precedents are anything to go by (they do, of course, also tell

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[110]   Baaklini et al, *Legislative Politics in the Arab World*,, pp. 5, 45 et passim; Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'Power Sharing and Elections in the Middle East', in Sven Behrendt & Christian Hanelt (eds.), *Bound to Cooperate – Europe and the Middle East* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 2000), pp. 359-375: at p. 373.

[111]   As suggested by Dahl, and Almond & Verba – see section *6.3.* (ii) above; see also Diamond, 'Introduction', pp. 10-11.

us once again that the dynamics producing real democratisation may only bear fruit in the much longer term.)

At a more specific level, at least *some* of the current reform evidence in different GCC states leaves room for a more positive spin than my earlier qualifications might suggest.

In *Kuwait*, the parliament has been able to frustrate a number of important policy initiatives of the ruling family – holding up women's right to vote (something personally pushed by the Amir) until a change of heart by Islamist groupings in 2005; blocking, for the time being, any progress on the plans to open northern Kuwait to investment by international energy firms ('Project Kuwait'); and, most recently, rejecting the government's preferred model for electoral redistricting – leading the Amir to dissolve the assembly and new elections to be held on 29 June 2006. Kuwait's parliament had, of course, already acquired the right to question royal and other ministers, and had indeed in effect forced a number of resignations since the reconvening of the full-fledged assembly after the liberation from Iraqi occupation. In fact, the direct trigger for the latest dissolution was a demand, for the first time in Kuwait's history, to question the prime minister, Shaikh Nasir Muhammad Al Sabah, appointed only months before by the new Amir, Shaikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah. But in addition a significant new feature was that a genuine popular movement emerged over the issue, headed by relatively younger figures from outside the usual political circles. It clearly modelled its tactics on the 'colour' movements in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, holding rallies (using orange) in support of a 5-district model (from the current 25) that would both make representation fairer and cut the potential for corruption – indeed arguably stiffening the parliamentarians' spine in the same cause (in the process, the Constitutional Court struck down a law that limited the right to such gatherings).

The episode may be an indication that parliament feels it can flex its muscles, following its crucial role in the succession of Shaikh Sabah amidst the royal family's inability to resolve the succession crisis of January 2006: following the death of Shaikh Jabir, the automatic succession of the Crown Prince, Shaikh Saad, was not formally completed by his taking the oath in parliament due both to an opposing majority within the family itself and parliamentary insistence (in the person of the speaker) that he had to take the oath in person in the assembly – something for which most expected he was too ill. Shaikh Saad's last-minute agreement to stand down came too late, as parliament had already voted to strip him of his title after little more than a week, and to anoint Shaikh Sabah as his successor. This was clearly the outcome preferred by most, but the family's perceived need to seek recourse to parliament's constitutional role being deployed in managing the succession crisis is likely to have been a significant point in the emirate's political evolution. It will now be difficult for the Al Sabah to diminish or override parliament again quite as easily as happened periodically until Iraq's invasion.

That is not to say that parliament is now supreme: the Al Sabah retains key levers of power (including the key 'power ministries'), and can continue to count on a number of pro-government 'service MPs', as well as on the ex officio membership made up by the ministers. But the redistricting episode has also shown that some senior members of the ruling family (one of whom headed the committee that initially came up with the 5-dictrict model) now

feel that the electoral and parliamentary system needs adjusting in a more democratic direction. Kuwait does gradually seem to be moving beyond the confines of the 'liberalized autocracy' model. Indeed, one of Kuwait's most authoritative academic observers has suggested that, 'If the issue [of redistricting] is finally resolved, it could open the way toward a broader discussion of representation including the issue of possible legalization of political parties].[112]

In *Bahrain*, the main, largely Shia-based, opposition group *Al-Wifaq*, has decided to reverse the stance it adopted in 2002, and participate in the elections scheduled for autumn 2006, judging that there is perhaps after all a genuine chance of gradually reforming the system – and at least initially already some policies and legislation – from within. And even with the continued splits within the ruling family over the pace of reform, and the recurrent clampdowns on civil society activism, it would seem unlikely that the regime will feel either able or willing to suppress what has become a much more vibrant political society and discourse enough to stop further gradual change.

In *Qatar*, the in-built limitations of the constitution still do leave a remarkable change in place, once the parliament is up and running in 2007: legislation *can* be pushed through with a simple majority and even if the Amir can send it back if he disagrees, parliament *can* then overrule him with a two-thirds majority. While it is true that the one-third of appointed members make it less likely that such a scenario would obtain, it is by no means impossible. The Amir can in extremis suspend the implementation of such legislation for some time if he deems it in the interests of the country, but clearly, extensive use of such intervention would soon bring the system into disrepute and would presumably be avoided if at all possible. Against the background of a rather uncontentious domestic political climate (with the partial exception of foreign affairs) that might augur for the parliament gradually being allowed to spread its wings, moving in the direction of Kuwait's political system.

Even in *Saudi Arabia*, there is a particularly interesting development in the evolution of the *Majlis al-Shura*'s stance on matters of taxation: in the words of one acute Saudi observer, the pattern of the Council's decisions shows it 'has taken a decision in principle not to agree to any imposition of taxes of higher fees unless they get a say over expenditure'[113]: about as literal a reflection of the old 'no taxation without representation' maxim as one might wish for. The nature and extent of some of the debate in the media and elsewhere, about the desirability of expanding elections to the *Majlis*, also indicates a changing political culture and climate that may support longer-term gradual evolution.[114]

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that even in *the UAE*, local experiments with partial election of emirate councils (perhaps first in Sharjah) may change the flavour of political life – exerting an effect both through electing, in turn, the members of the mooted new FNC, and through demonstration effects in neighbouring emirates. While there has been no

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[112]   Ghanim Al Najjar, 'Kuwait: Struggle over Parliament', *Arab Reform Bulletin* (Carnegie Endowment, June 2006 Vol. 4, no. 5) (http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=18413&prog=zgp&proj=zdrl#kuwaitStruggle)

[113]   Personal communication, March 2005.

[114]   See note 19.

groundswell of opinion pushing for participation, the issue has nevertheless be discussed for some years among some of the intelligentsia (and even some members of ruling families), especially in emirates such as Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah but also beyond, given the increasing professional, business and social mixing of the various emirates' elites.[115] It is perhaps telling, also, that the Secretary-General of the FNC, Muhammad al-Mazrui, felt free at a recent conference to make the hardly veiled point that 'whenever a legislature has more authority, it performs better.'[116]

Finally, in *Oman*, too, a number of tentatively positive indications can be gleaned. Even amidst the general reluctance to explore the boundaries of the permissible, there nevertheless appears to be an expectation on the part of at least *some* well-placed officials, parliamentary officials and assembly members, that the elected *Majlis al-Shura* will, within the next 10 years, have acquired significantly expanded powers – possibly even beginning to stretch, according to some, into the area of foreign affairs. The fact that some dissenting voices, expressing frustration at the pointlessness of much of the assembly's activity, feel able to give their assessment quite candidly, even from significant positions in the institutions of government or parliament itself, is perhaps in itself another indication of a gradual and partial change in elite political culture. It is also certainly the case that – as in the other GCC states – some members of the royal family are genuinely reformist-minded. And the very experience in 2003 of technically fair elections under universal suffrage with quite extensive competition and at least some results not in line with expected local tribal dominance, may in itself feed into modestly changing mass political culture.[117] That said, the prospects for tangible moves anytime soon towards the key components of a democratic system – political participation, accountability and pluralism – do remain faint at best.

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[115]   See also Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates*, Chapter 5.
[116]   'The Gulf in a Year', Gulf Research Center meeting, Dubai, Grand Hyatt, January 2005 – i.e. well before the announcement that the Council's size and role would be expanded.
[117]   Off-the-record interviews and observation in Muscat, Oman, over several visits in 2003-2004.

8.0 CONCLUSION

These regimes are not about to collapse, Eastern European-style, amidst a fiscal and legitimacy crisis: material and legitimacy resources remain relatively more abundant, so a sudden wholesale change of the system is highly unlikely. Further liberalising reform is likely in the short-to-medium term. Quite possibly, the factors militating against further change may leave most of these polities trapped in the 'liberalised autocracy' stage. Yet neither can the possibility be dismissed that, subject to continuing change in their domestic and external environments, they might eventually move beyond it, as, indeed, Kuwait is already doing. As suggested elsewhere for the case of Saudi Arabia, '*If* that happens, it will come as the result of a very gradual process, driven and signalled as much by the incremental expansion of representative institutions' grip on day-to-day and technical decision-making, and of the habit-forming effect of even limited exercises in political participation and discussion, as by grand political departures.'[118]

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[118]   Aarts & Nonneman, 'A Triple Nexus', pp. 454-455.