

Arab Monarchies: The Fateful Hour?

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One of the most significant features of the last two years of upheaval across the Arab world is that the eight Arab monarchical regimes—the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Morocco and Jordan—dodged the proverbial bullet and survived, unlike the republican authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, all of which were toppled. Bashar al-Asad’s regime in Syria is likely to be added to the list as well. The survival of Arab monarchies calls for an explanation. Monarchies appeared to possess important assets that enabled them to better manage the storms raging throughout the region. However, this hardly means that Arab monarchies are immune from potentially destabilizing challenges to the status quo.

Until the twentieth century, Islamic rulers did not take the title “king” (*malik*), as it “was regarded as non-Islamic and therefore unlawful and corrupt.”¹ Kingship later gained prestige from association with the British Empire and the title was assumed by several Middle Eastern leaders—beginning with Sharif Hussein in 1916 in the Hijaz (later Saudi Arabia)—as a way to proclaim sovereignty and

¹ Joseph Kostiner, “Introduction,” in *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity*, ed. Joseph Kostiner (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 1.

independence from the Ottoman Empire or other external powers.² Monarchy was also the form of government encouraged or implemented by the British as former mandated territories were reorganized into states. But with the overthrow of the monarchies in Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958, Yemen in 1962 and Libya in 1969, monarchies appeared to be on the way out, an archaic form of government inappropriate for the modern age. Despite this, the other eight Arab monarchies have survived well into the twenty-first century.

Mainstream scholarship in recent years has emphasized the resilience and durability of Arab monarchies, albeit for differing reasons.³ Many argue that kings and ruling emirs, as opposed to authoritarian republican presidents, possess an extra measure of legitimacy, owing to their intimate relationship with their subjects.⁴ This intimacy is an extension of the tribal relationship of chiefs to their people; the king is the “head chief,” the “father of the nation.” In various ways, kings claim tribal, dynastic, and religious legitimacy simultaneously, enabling them to place themselves above their countries’ social and political divisions. For example, the concluding phrase of the Moroccan national anthem, “God, Fatherland, King” (*Allah, al-Watan, al-Malik*) highlights the efforts of the Moroccan monarchy to present itself as the unifying symbol at the center of the state and therefore as an irreplaceable part of the state’s political and social identity. Others choose to explain the durability of the monarchies by reference to geo-political factors, such as large-scale military, political, and economic support from Western countries, or economic factors, primarily the Gulf states’ possession of large oil reserves which allow them to function as *rentier* states in which power attained through oil revenues is vested in the hands of the ruling elite. This achieves a depoliticization of society in return for sharing some of the largess.

² Bernard Lewis, “Monarchy in the Middle East,” in *Middle East Monarchies*, op. cit., 19.

³ See, e.g., Lisa Anderson, “Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106 (1991); Hillel Frisch, “Why Monarchies Persist: Balancing between Internal and External Vulnerability,” *Review of International Studies* 37 (2011).

⁴ See, e.g., Michael C. Hudson, “Arab Regimes and Democratization: Responses to the Challenge of Political Islam,” *The International Spectator* 29(4) (1994); Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui, “Are the Arab Monarchies Next?” *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 2013, <http://mondediplo.com/2013/01/02arab>.

However, the psychological dimension of the Arab Spring needs to be factored into current evaluations of the monarchies' long term chances for survival. The fact that masses of ordinary citizens rallied in public squares and ultimately succeeded in removing previously all-powerful dictators has left its mark on monarchs and their subjects alike. In the last two years, Arab monarchies have experienced volatile public debates that pose significant challenges to the status quo. Bahrain's Sunni monarchy managed to reassert control over the assertive Shi'i protest movement only with the help of Saudi-led intervention, but stability there is far from being guaranteed. Demonstrations in Morocco and Jordan occur almost continuously. In response, Morocco's King Mohammed VI managed to relegitimize his rule and buy time with a package of constitutional reforms. Jordan's King Abdallah has also sought to make changes: he has dissolved Parliament several times, fired three prime ministers,⁵ amended election laws (albeit not to the extent that some wish), and initiated nation-wide parliamentary elections, which will be held on January 23, 2013.⁶ In Saudi Arabia and Oman, where public protest is almost unheard of, voices of discontent focus on the cost of living and on civil rights.

Arab monarchies are certainly not of one stripe. Four of the six GCC states—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—are *rentier* states, with extensive oil and natural gas resources, and share broad historical, political and socio-cultural commonalities.⁷ The other two GCC states—Bahrain and Oman—also have a share in the petro dollar trade. Even so, each country has its distinct fabric and faces specific challenges, e.g. the Sunni-Shi'i fissure in Bahrain. By contrast, neither Jordan nor Morocco are petroleum exporters or refiners. Jordan, in particular, is economically disadvantaged and requires substantial external support.

⁵ "Jordan," *New York Times*, 16 November 2012, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/jordan/index.html>.

⁶ See, e.g., "Disagreements over Jordan's New Electoral Law," Election Guide, 23 July 2012, <http://electionguide.org/country-news.php?ID=110>.

⁷ Kuwait has a functioning pluralist political system with an active parliament; thus, it is not under discussion here.

Nonetheless, a common thread runs through the public perception of Arab monarchies in today's Middle East. The support they lent to Bahrain's ruling Al Khalifa family, Egypt's Mubarak and Tunisia's Ben Ali is well remembered and despised by the supporters of the Arab Spring. Indeed, the Gulf monarchies' active support for the anti-Qaddafi and anti-Asad forces in Libya and Syria was designed, in part, to improve their tarnished image of being counter-revolutionary. But the recent establishment in Egypt and Tunisia of parliamentary systems with free elections may have a psychological effect that will ratchet up the pressure for change within the Arab monarchical states. One cannot rule out that the frame of reference for could shift: rather than favorably comparing ruling monarchs to iron-fisted civilian Arab dictators, monarchical subjects may compare their rulers unfavorably to the more open and politically contested countries that have deposed their dictators and instituted free elections and parliamentary representation.

The coming year promises to test the Arab monarchies. Jordan and Morocco are already struggling to cope with rising discontent from various political and social forces. Their efforts to promote a controlled opening of the political system indicate an understanding that times have changed, and that cosmetic reforms may no longer be sufficient. A certain devolution of power from the Palace to elected officials and political institutions would seem to be a necessary component for the monarchies' ultimate survival. At the same time, however, modern Arab monarchs face what Samuel P. Huntington called "the king's dilemma": that is, the phenomenon that modernization introduced as limited top-down reforms frequently increases rather than decreases demands for change from the middle-class while alienating traditional support bases (e.g., wealthy landowners, tribal chiefs and merchants). On the other hand, ignoring such demands for change creates the risk of being toppled by a revolution.⁸ Therefore, monarchs and their accompanying ruling elites who seek to recontract

⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 177-180.

with their societies by instituting genuine and substantial reform face a difficult balancing act.

The picture of the benevolent patriarch wrapped in dynastic religious legitimacy has become deeply cracked, even among the oil-rich monarchies. One of the lessons of the successful Arab Spring protests was that excessive repression can, under certain circumstances, boomerang against the authorities, with fateful consequences. Monarchs who pursue an overly inflexible approach to demands for reform could well destroy their finely cultivated image as benevolent rulers, attentive and connected to their nation, and instead become another version of iron-fisted Middle Eastern despots. In addition, the educated youth in these countries, among whom unemployment rates are particularly high, are prominent in the public discourse of discontent and often express their solidarity with the revolutionary forces in the other Arab countries. In the mid- or long-term, these youth are likely to pose fundamental sociopolitical challenges to the ruling royal houses.

For now, protest movements within monarchical states are demanding political reform but not the actual overthrow of their rulers or the monarchical regimes. Attempting to achieve the latter could plunge their countries into a whirlwind of chaos and violence, a scenario that both regimes and most social protest movements are keen to avoid. Only sophisticated and finely tuned political balancing, in which the ruling monarchs open the political system to some degree and the bulk of the public is consciously willing to make compromises, will enable the monarchies to weather the expected rough days which lie ahead.

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