



**The Evolution of Political Institutions and Dynasties in the Arab Gulf States:
Analyzing Patriarchy, Constitutional Frameworks, and Electoral Systems**

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Abstract:

The objective of this study is to examine the political structures and processes in the Gulf states. The potential stage of political growth in a given state or area can be better assessed by having an understanding of political institutions, systems, and cultures. The Middle East, which includes the Gulf nations of Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain, has had a gradual pace of political development and a democratic process. It is a qualitative study and to evaluate the similarities and differences between the Gulf states, a number of their characteristics are compared. Saudi Arabia is the most conservative country in the Gulf, although Kuwait tops the other five states overall in terms of parliamentary traditions. There are various factors for this situation that are explored in order to shed light on the Gulf region's lack of democracy. This study discusses elections, councils, political norms, ideals, and beliefs, as well as conditions of affairs that are patriarchal, constitutional, legal, and judicial.

Keywords: Arab Gulf States, patriarchy, dynasties, political institutions, constitutions, elections

INTRODUCTION

The world's greatest oil reserves are found in the Gulf region, which makes it significant. This area has long been recognized as the birthplace and geographic hub of Islam. There are numerous commonalities among the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members that are the subject of this study. However, they also differ in a few other respects. The most noticeable characteristic in common is Arab ethnicity. Consequently, the people living in this region have a sense of Arab fraternity. The second most notable thing that the six Gulf States have in common, if not the first, is their dynamic regimes.

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When examining the differences, Saudi Arabia's disproportionately large territory—86 percent of the total area of the six countries—stands out the most. The country's enormous size in relation to the other five GCC states has served as a foundation for its importance in other domains, such as population and economic volume. With a land size of 620 square kilometres and the smallest population of the six nations, Bahrain is the smallest. At the start of the twenty-first century, Kuwait had the largest percentage of urban population (98%), while the United Arab Emirates had the highest rate of population growth (3.69%).

Saudi Arabia is organized administratively into thirteen provinces. Qatar has nine municipalities, and Bahrain has twelve. Kuwait is divided into six governorates, and Oman is divided into eight entities (six regions and two governorates). Seven emirates make up the federation known as the United Arab Emirates. Oman stands out among the other five Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations due to its longer history of independence. It gained independence in 1650 but the other five states gained their independence in the twentieth century between 1932 and 1971.

This article makes an effort to examine political cultures, structures, and organizations in the six Gulf countries in the perspective of democracy and authoritarianism. Constitutions, patriarchy, dynasties, and the legal and judicial systems are looked at.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The writers look at a wide range of factors in their separate research. While some have concentrated on women's issues and challenges, others have concentrated on human rights. Some have dealt with problems that have beset the region's educational systems, while others have addressed the rights breaches of migrant workers. There has also been discussion of political topics and difficulties. The political structures, ideologies, and customs of the GCC nations have not, however, been thoroughly researched. The goal of this study is to compare and evaluate the three political facets of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman.

In the Gulf states, the forces of status quo outweigh the forces of change (Abdullah, 2011). There is essentially no domestic political life (Ottaway, 2021). Although there are many modern conveniences, politics' core principles are still very much the same (Peterson, 2001). The top-down policy process and the ruling establishment's considerable engagement are still in place (Alhouthi 2023, 67). Within the states, tribal affiliations have existed for many generations (Abraham, 2015).

The ruling families and their entourages hold nearly all of the significant ministries, like the top positions of heads of state (Ayubi, 1995; Herb, 2002). In the Arab world, officers stand up for their ruling regimes above all others (Cook 2006, 65). The dynasty rulers enjoy unrestricted powers despite the region's growing population of technocrats and other professionals (Ecevit 1993, 144). The Gulf monarchies' responses to the Arab uprisings and the COVID-19 show that the rentier model can still be sustained over the long term and that increasing the state's social spending can still lead to stability and resilience (Zaccara & Battaloglu 2023, 117).

In terms of conservatism, Saudi Arabia is described as an authoritarian state par excellence (Seznec 2002, 33), politically archaic, tyrannical (Longrigg 1970, 85), ultraconservative (Allam, 2009), and having one of the world's most closed political systems. The Saudi government has modified its approach, which now favours coopting opposition over suppressing it (Cordesman 2003, 132). The Saudi Crown Prince introduced Vision 2030, which seeks to change the state's standing internationally and improve several standards (Bilan 2024, 28). The parliament of Kuwait is the only one in the Arab world with the ability to check the executive branch's power (Palmer & Perkins 2004, 456; Yom, 2005). Thanks in part to the backing of its neighbors and the effectiveness of its broad assault on political dissent, Bahrain was able to weather the political turmoil that followed the Arab uprisings (Zweiri & Suleiman 2022, 166).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research study is based on both primary and secondary source material. The key source materials include official records and interviews. Reviewing the official papers allowed us to evaluate the state of political institutions, systems, and cultures in the Arab Gulf States. Secondary sources include books, articles, handouts, and websites with relevant content from magazines, journals, and newspapers. Using primary and secondary source materials, the study examines the political institutions' evolution, the dynamics of the political systems, and the key characteristics of the political cultures in the Gulf region from a variety of perspectives.

POLITICAL SYSTEMS, INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURES

While nearly every aspect of a state's and society's existence must be considered in order to envision democracy and democratization, their primary focus is on the political arena. Thus, the political structures, systems, and cultures of the countries under investigation are the subject of this research. It is entirely accurate to describe the Arab world as a whole as a "political desert" (Zakaria 2003, 142), in which no government permits the establishment of political parties. An Abu Dhabi banker stated that there is no politics in the United Arab Emirates when questioned about the country's political climate (Personal communication, Jan. 15, 2010). In general, political criticism and dissent are not accepted.

There is essentially no domestic political life in the region (Ottaway, 2021). A country's "global freedom status" is determined by the US-based nonprofit organization Freedom House using a score system of one to hundred. It classified Bahrain (12), Oman (24), Qatar (25), Saudi Arabia (7), and the UAE (17) as "not free" in 2021, and Kuwait (37) as "partly free" (Brown, 2022). The top-down policy process and the ruling establishment's considerable engagement are still in place (Alhouti 2023, 67). In the Gulf states, status quo pressures outweigh change-oriented ones (Abdullah, 2011). In the mostly conservative Gulf, continuity has long been regarded as the better course of action. The Gulf states are using all of their enormous resources to prevent the forces of change from gaining traction, even though they are not immune to them (Abdullah, 2011).

In this region of the Arab world, the prevailing belief is that the Gulf States are unique and will always be unique; we are not Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, or Syria. They had enough defence against the exceptionally powerful winds of change of 2011, thanks to their economic prosperity, numerous socioeconomic achievements, high standard of living, relatively small population, tribal way of life, steadfast traditional sources of legitimacy, genuine and deep respect for reform-minded leaders,

lack of Western pressure, and ability to act as a group—the GCC, which is unique in the region. The ruling elites in the region believe that the Gulf exceptionality is a reality that should be protected at all costs, even if it involves using force to maintain the status quo in situations where it is truly threatened. When it comes to freedom and democracy, the majority of the Gulf states are not at their best. It is true that the Gulf states score highly on the Human Development Index but poorly on the Freedom and Democracy Index (Abdullah, 2011).

On the one hand, internal security structures were strengthened following the Arab upheavals, Laws against terrorism and cybercrime were enacted, making opposition movements and activities more illegal. On the other hand, redistributive measures were used to revive the social compact that already existed between the monarchs of the GCC and their people, with the exception of Bahrain. This shows that stability and resilience can still be attained by increasing the state's social expenditure, and that the rentier model is long-term viable (Zaccara & Battaloglu 2023, 117).

Based on decades of complaints held by Bahrain's population, large-scale protests and banners demanding political reform, social fairness, and citizenship rights were hoisted at the Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain in February 2011. Shortly after the demonstrators took over the roundabout, the security officers attacked them violently, which made the situation worse. As a result, their demands grew to include the overthrow of the established political class and the dismantling of the political structure itself. Afterwards, participating governments Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates dispatched the Peninsula Shield soldiers to Bahrain in March 2011 in order to safeguard the political system and quell the revolt. The assistance of its neighbors and the effectiveness of its broad crackdown on any political dissent allowed Bahrain to weather its political turmoil (Zweiri & Suleiman 2022, 166).

Like some of its neighbors, Kuwait's internal situation was impacted by the surrounding upheavals, but the people insisted on calling for political reforms under the national constitution of 1962. Furthermore, following allegations against 13 members for accepting bribes to influence the Parliament, Sheikh Jaber bin Mubarak disbanded the legislature and forced the resignation of the government. Since Kuwait is a constitutional state, reform is being carried out. Furthermore, the process of demanding social reform and other rights occurs continually and not just for a set period of time because of the existence of the Kuwaiti parliament and civil society organizations (Zweiri & Suleiman 2022, 166-7). In Bahrain, political opposition parties were outlawed and disbanded. Protesters and activists had their citizenship revoked by the UAE, and they were deported. Saudi Arabia carried out the execution of some political personalities. Political resistance essentially vanished in the majority of cases. The GCC political regimes and their socioeconomic models were successfully ensured to survive through the application of these measures (Zaccara & Battaloglu 2023, 115-6).

Thanks to its gas exports, Qatar boasts one of the greatest GDPs per capita in the world. Its population of slightly over 300,000 people seems pleased with the status quo and has not attempted to overthrow the al-Thani family. Conversely, the family does not seem to feel the need to publicly announce that it is liberalising its political system just yet (Ottaway, 2021). The Saudi Crown Prince's Vision 2030 seeks to change the state's standing internationally and reform some rules, but it may not go far enough in tackling issues that are too intimately tied to the political system (Bilan 2024, 28).

Dynasties

The six states are ruled by six families: al-Thani in Qatar, al-Saud in Saudi Arabia, al-Khalifa in Bahrain, al-Bu Sai'di in Oman, and al-Nahyan in the United Arab Emirates. The ruling families and their entourages hold nearly all of the significant ministries, like the top positions of heads of state (Ayubi, 1995; Herb, 2002). The seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates are each headed by a family (Ottaway, 2021). For fifteen years, from 2006 to 2020, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah held the position of Emir of Kuwait. Sheikh Mishal al-Ahmad Al-Sabah assumed the throne in 2023. Saudi Arabia was headed by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz from 2005 to 2015. Salman bin Abdul Aziz succeeded him as king in 2015. The Federal National Council (FNC) selected Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan to be President in 2004. He governed the United Arab Emirates (UAE), from 2004 to 2022. In 2022, his half-brother Mohamed bin Zayed succeeded him. Bahrain has been ruled by Shaikh Hamad bin Isa for more than 25 years (1999–present). After ruling Qatar for almost 20 years (1995–2013), Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani abdicated in favour of his son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, in 2013. Following a coup against his father, Sultan Qaboos of Oman controlled the country for 50 years (1970–2020), surpassing all of his regional rivals. Sultan Haitem Bin Tariq, his cousin, succeeded him after his death.

However, there are still internal conflicts among the ruling families over influence and authority. Even though they are uncommon, successful and unsuccessful coups have occurred throughout history. For instance, there were reports of Bahrain's most recent palace coup in 1923. But conflict, unrest, and rivalry have characterised Bahrain's ruling dynasty's past. In 1995 and 1970, respectively, Sheikh Hamad of Qatar and Sultan Qaboos of Oman usurped their fathers' positions of authority (Khalaf 2006, 45-7).

Numerous justifications have been offered to account for the dynastic regimes' continued hold on power in the Gulf. Among these explanations are (a) social structures and political culture; (b) oil revenue and the rentier state; (c) the direct and indirect involvement of the United States and Britain; and (d) a rigid hierarchy, especially with regard to Saudi Arabia (Calvocoressi 2000, 478; Khalaf 2006, 8). In order to preserve their power, the ruling families in these oil kingdoms have relied on two key concepts: historical and economic (Kamrava & Mora 1998, 907). The Saudi government has modified its approach, which now favours coopting opposition over suppressing it (Cordesman 2003, 132).

Patriarchy and Concentration of Powers

The communities around the Gulf are controlled by men, and the kings hold the majority of the power. Even more intriguing was the scenario in Oman, where Sultan Qaboos was the single person holding the positions of prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, minister of defence, finance minister, and chairman of the Oman Central Bank. The 1996 Basic Law of Oman contains provisions empowering the Ruling Family's Council to propose a *male* descendant of Sayyid Turki bin Said bin Sultan for the throne (Khalaf 2006, 48). In a similar vein, the only *male* heirs to the Saudi kingdom are those descended from King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud. The rule is passed down through the *sons* of King Abdul Aziz and the *sons of sons*, according to the 1992 Basic Law of the Kingdom. Only those descended from Shaikh Mubarak Al-Sabah are subject to the rule in Kuwait (Khalaf 2006, 46-8).

Because of the regional political frameworks, the ruling establishments have the final say over the formulation and execution of all policies, making these political systems among the most centralized in the world. Given that the state was thought to be a clan state, the ruler's deep involvement in all affairs was considered reasonable (Alhouti 2023, 84-5).

Two waves of reforms were brought about in the Gulf region by the events of 9/11/2001 and the 2011 Arab uprisings. It became urgent for the GCC States to address internal political instability as a result of the reform demands made by the demonstrators who took to the streets in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) during what became known as the "Arab Spring" (Abraham, 2015). A major step towards advancing gender equality in the workplace was taken in 2019 when Saudi local councils eliminated gender-segregation practices in their offices (Polok 2024, 6).

In addition, a royal decree issued in 2020 granted women the authority to register as a "head of household" and take on civil status-related tasks such as marriage, divorce, and birth registration. With the passage of this amendment, women were free to choose where they lived, no longer needing permission from their legal guardians as they had to do previously (Polok 2024, 10).

A woman's right to leave the house is unjustified unless she works or studies, and her male guardian must provide it to her. But not every woman experiences the same limitations on her freedom of movement. The way a lady lives her life is influenced by social divisions and the kindness of her guardians (Salhi 2024, 256).

Constitutions

Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are the four GCC nations that have written constitutions. Both Bahrain's and Qatar's constitutional histories are unimpressive. The constitution of Bahrain was ratified in 2002, whereas the constitution of Qatar was ratified in 2003 and went into force in 2005. Despite being the most recently independent nations and possessing the largest territories out of the six GCC nations, Saudi Arabia and Oman do not have any kind of constitution. Out of the six, Kuwait has the longest standing constitution, having been ratified and issued in 1962. Although it was made permanent in 1996, the constitution of the United Arab Emirates, which was introduced in 1971, has the second-longest history.

Kuwait is a unique example in the Gulf, even if it is still not a democracy in the true sense. The nation's unicameral legislature, the 50-member National Assembly, which is chosen by popular ballot, was established under the 1962 Constitution. Kuwait's democratic development was greatly accelerated by the Constitution (Assiri & Al-Monoufi 1988, 48; Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2003). Since 1992, Kuwait has remained the only Arab nation with a parliament that can hold the executive branch to account and that has the power to force cabinet members to resign. In 1963, there were the first elections to the parliament (Palmer & Perkins 2004, 456; Yom, 2005).

Law and Justice

Sharia and Islamic law predominate in the legal systems of the region, despite the fact that civil law, secular laws, and English common law are all included in these nations' legal systems to varied degrees. The kings also hold the final say in matters of law and justice. According to the Ibn Khaldun Centre, Saudi Arabia has the least independent judiciary and the least equal legal system among the countries in the area. Once more, Saudi Arabia is said to have the worst policies when it comes to

handling public gatherings and demonstrations. In Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, the judiciary has no say whatsoever in topics pertaining to the constitution (Brown, 1998; Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, n.d.). “Extremist judges” who prejudice against “infidels” (religious minorities and non-Muslims) predominate in Saudi courts. In actuality, the political establishment influences the judiciary (Seznec, 2002).

Councils and Elections

The United Arab Emirates has a unicameral Majlis al-Ittihad al-Watani or Federal National Council (FNC) and Qatar has a unicameral Majlis al-Shura (Advisory Council). Saudi Arabia has the Majlis al-Shura (Advisory Council) while Kuwait has the unicameral Majlis al-Umma (National Assembly). Bicameralism is practiced in Bahrain and Oman. The Bahraini legislature is composed of an Advisory Council and a Council of Representatives, often known as the Chamber of Deputies. Each of the two houses has forty members: the lower house, the Council of Representatives, is directly elected by the people, while the upper body, the Advisory Council, is selected by the king. Majlis Oman is made up of the upper house, Majlis al-Dawla, and the lower house, Majlis al-Shura. Similar to Bahrain, Omanis elect members of the lower house, while the sultan appoints members of the upper house. There are 71 members in the Majlis Oman upper house and 84 in the lower house.

The Majlis al-Shura of Qatar has the fewest seats, at 35. Majlis al-Umma of Kuwait has fifty seats, while Majlis al-Ittihad al-Watani of the United Arab Emirates has forty seats (half elected and half appointed). The Majlis al-Shura of Saudi Arabia has the most seats, with 150. Nearly all of these organisations, with the exception of Kuwait, are powerless. With the exception of the United Arab Emirates, where the president is chosen by the casting of seven ballots by the rulers of each of the seven emirates, there is no idea of elections pertaining to the executive authority. In the United Arab Emirates, the president appoints the prime minister, deputy prime minister, and cabinet members. In a similar vein, the monarchs appoint the cabinet members in the remaining five states. Deputy prime ministers in Kuwait and prime ministers in Bahrain and Kuwait are also appointed by the monarchs.

To prevent serious challenges to the ruling families, the majority of them still forbid political parties and attempt to turn politics into a contest between independent candidates. There are no real political parties in Kuwait either. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia outlaws all political organizations and only permits restricted political involvement at the local level. More palatable authoritarian regimes, not democracy, are the aim of these kings. The second lesson is that parties emerge as soon as political involvement in any form is permitted, even in cases when authorities try to suppress them. Limited participation is now being provided from the top in some of the Gulf’s Arab nations, as opposed to being demanded from the bottom by powerful political forces. Bahrain’s system is extremely restrictive, whereas Kuwait’s is dysfunctional but generally benign. Because of this, even though Bahrain legally acknowledges the existence of political “societies,” which are de facto parties, interest groupings seem to be less organized (Ottaway, 2021).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) made the decision to permit elections for its Federal National Council (FNC), an advisory body with very little authority, in 2006. Representatives from each of the seven emirates that make up the UAE make up the FNC; the number of representatives varies according to the size of each emirate’s population. Until 2006, the delegates were appointed

(Ottaway, 2021). The government took its time holding elections. Rather, the procedure of choosing a limited number of residents who would be eligible to vote was left up to each emirate. The public's response seems to have been more confusion and amusement than genuine outrage, even though they were never made aware of how voters were chosen in the various emirates. It was a popular joke that in the United Arab Emirates, the government chooses the voters, not the other way around. Just 6,500 people cast ballots in the first election, which was a relatively low amount at first, but the number rose with each subsequent election. Around 337,000 people were registered to vote in 2019, but only about 33% of them actually showed up to vote.

Oman merits greater attention since the public's discontent is exerting some pressure on the authorities. On the surface, it resembles any other authoritarian sultanate, with all adults over 21 being able to form political parties and cast ballots for a weak Shura Council. In general, the ruling elites are very wary of any political involvement that would jeopardize their hold on power; even those who believe it is crucial to present a picture of involvement want to limit it to private citizens rather than formal political organizations (Ottaway, 2021).

Political Values

Saudi Arabia's conservatism and intolerance grew over the final decades of the 20th century. Petrodollar inflows strengthened the Saudi regime's hold, and a repressive state began to emerge in place of some degree of pluralism (Hamzawy, 2007). In his memoir *The Sheltered Quarter*, Bogari (1991 cited by Elmusa 1997, 348) wrote that throughout the initial part of the 20th century, the environment in the holy city of Mecca was more accommodating. All of the sociopolitical systems in the Gulf share conservatism. Bans on radios, bicycles, and sunglasses in Oman during Sultan Qaboos' reign are an intriguing illustration of regional conservatism. These things were considered to be Western customs (Slackman, 2009). Over the past few decades, the region's material face has undergone significant transformation. Although modern communication technologies, luxury goods, and high-tech devices are everywhere, politics' core principles mostly remain unchanged (Peterson, 2001).

Commentators describe the Saudi Arabian scenario in the harshest and most negative terms. Regarding the conservative nature, it is described as being one of the world's most closed political systems (Allam, 2009), politically archaic, a theocratic totalitarian state (Longrigg 1970, 85), ultraconservative, and an excellent example of an authoritarian state (Seznec 2002, 33). Osama bin Laden's brother's wife, Carmen, a Swiss woman, and Kurpershoek, a former Dutch ambassador to Saudi Arabia, make similarities between Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands and between Saudi Arabia and Geneva. Kurpershoek described Saudi Arabia as the opposite of the Netherlands, a place that values experimentation and individual expression above everything else. Carmen remarked that Geneva is a millennium away while she was living in Saudi Arabia (Kurpershoek 2001, 265; Ladin 2005, 43).

CONCLUSION

The Gulf region's social, cultural, and political institutions have evolved the least in recent decades as compared to other Middle Eastern regions. Six families control the six Gulf states in complete sentence. Even if the number of technocrats and other professionals in this region is rising, the hereditary rulers still control most of the power. Several explanations have been put forth to

explain the dynastic regimes' continuous dominance in the Gulf. Dynastic power struggles have an impact on the ruling families. Men rule the Gulf countries, and they frequently possess the lion's share of authority.

Where they exist, constitutions serve to legitimize the kings' unchecked authority. Sharia and Islamic law are the main components of the legal systems in the area. There is no idea of elections concerning the executive authority, with the exception of the United Arab Emirates, where the president is chosen by the casting of seven ballots by the rulers of seven emirates. When comparing these regimes, Saudi Arabia is the most repressive socially and Oman is the most oppressive politically. However, the comparison shows that Bahrain is the most liberal country in terms of social policies, while Kuwait is the most open country in terms of politics.

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