

■ ■ ■ ELECTIONS AS CONTEMPORARY MECHANISM FOR LEGITIMATION OF THE GULF OIL MONARCHIES IN THE POST 'ARAB SPRING' ERA

Author: KJURCHISKI N.

KJURCHISKI Nikola, PhD, candidate in political science at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA); Research Analyst of the Center for Resource Economics at RANEPA.

Address: 119571, Moscow, Vernadskiy Prospekt, 84.
Osogovska 30, Kamenica, Macedonia.

E-mail: kyurchiski-nv@ranepa.ru; **Tel.:** +7 916 178 66 79

Abstract: Gulf oil monarchies (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates– UAE, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait) are facing big challenges after two major events took place in recent years: oil price plunge and the events derived from the Arab Spring. Combined amplitude of the oil price drop and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, is big enough for ruling elites to recognize the necessity of political re-legitimation. Oil rent occurs as a main source of government income appearing as crucial fundament for ensuring political stability and keeping the social rest. Arab Spring additionally increased the threat to the oil monarchies. This article argues that contemporary electoral process in Gulf oil monarchies plays the role of limited re-legitimizing mechanism for the regimes confronted by their citizens after the Arab Spring and the drop of the oil prices.

Keywords: Oil monarchies, GCC, Arab Spring, elections, legitimation, political system

Introduction

Gulf oil monarchies, also known as Gulf Cooperation Council– GCC (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait) have relatively opened and liberalized economic systems, but very closed and conservative political systems. None of these countries are democracies, but their political systems are authoritarian hereditary monarchies. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman are absolute monarchies, Kuwait and Bahrain are constitutional monarchies, whilst UAE is federation of monarchies. Despite the small differences in the political systems of these monarchies, all monarchs are given almost absolute power. However, this absolute power is shaken after two major events that took place in recent years. First one is the oil price plunge and second, are the events derived from the Arab Spring. Both these events have the potential to redefine the political, economic and/or social systems in these countries, giving new directions for future development.

Combined amplitude of the oil price drop and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, is big enough for ruling elites to recognize the necessity of political

re-legitimation. Beetham, especially emphasizes the legitimation of power in times of crisis [1]. Until the occurrence of these events, ruling elites in GCC countries have drawn legitimacy mainly from the religion, through alliances with religious authorities and rule in accordance with Islamic norms, originating from Prophet Muhammad [2]. Religion is very old and well known legitimation mechanism for the rulers throughout history, but in the case of Gulf oil monarchies this mechanism still plays crucial role for legitimation even today. It is not used only for legitimation, but also to justify its political decisions made by the ruling elites. However, new developments have compelled oil monarchies to look for contemporary mechanism for legitimation of its power. Elections are the most common and most reliable mechanism used in today's democratic world. Even though, elections would not be first electoral experience for the Gulf oil monarchies [3], all elections prior the Arab Spring were characterized by big deficiencies, and according to the democratic standards could not be considered as valid. Therefore, elections in post Arab Spring era are showing some signs of progress.

Oil revenues as factor of political and social stability

Gulf oil monarchies are all resource economies i.e. oil and gas economies. According to IMF definition, resource economy is a country where average share of hydrocarbon and/or mineral revenues in total fiscal revenue is at least 25% or an average share of hydrocarbon and/or mineral export proceeds in total export proceeds of at least 25% [4, p.55]. Oil sector is dominating the economy in these countries, and oil rent occurs as a main source of government income. This income is crucial fundament for ensuring political stability and keeping the social rest. Undermining this fundament can easily cause domino effect leading to potential collapse of the whole system. Even though diversification from the oil revenues is given priority in almost all country development programs for the future, but it can take a while since the first results would be visible. Emirate of Dubai is most diversified in this sense, its dependence from the oil revenues is less than 3% now, whilst Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince Mohammed bin Salman just announced the strategy of post-oil era, called "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030" [5].

As the oil prices has plunged for about 60% in the last 2 years, big shift in the economic and political system is starting to take place. It is getting harder under low oil prices to support the expensive and robust public administration, dominated by the nationals, whilst they are not found competitive enough to migrate into the private sector. In this case government has two choices, whether to decrease the wages or to decrease the size of the public administration itself. However, majority of the population would have to sacrifice their leisure life style, which may result with civil unrests.

Figure 1, is showing the share of oil and gas revenues in the budget and the GDP of three selected Gulf oil monarchies: Bahrain, Oman and UAE. Heavy dependence on oil revenues, is feature of all oil monarchies, not just the selected countries, where the government budgets are strongly affected.

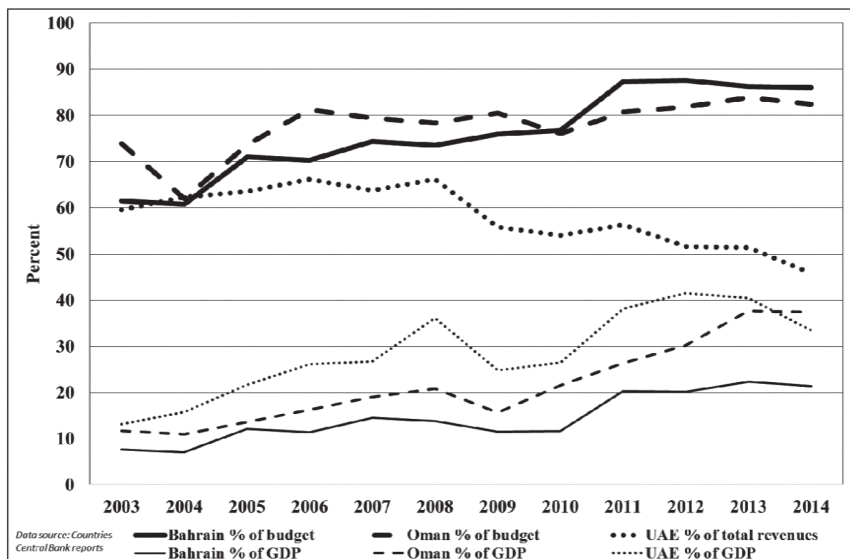


Figure 1. Oil and gas revenues as a percentage of the budget and the GDP in Bahrain, Oman and UAE

Only economically strong country can provide social welfare and financial security for its citizens. These prerequisites are essential in order to have ‘good citizens’, who will obey the laws, contribute to society and participate in public affairs. Aristotle in his “Politics” first presents the concept of good citizen and explains the difference between ‘good citizen’ and ‘good man’ [6]. In this sense, the impact from the low oil price could be staggering in the mid and long run, leaving unforeseeable socio-economic and political consequences. Such consequences could occur if oil monarchies would not succeed to lower the dependence on oil revenues i.e. to diversify its economies. They would no longer be able to provide these prerequisites to its citizens, and principal responsibility of such outcome would be demanded from the ruling families.

Arab Spring – last alert for reforms

The riot that begun in Tunisia in 2010, popularly known as the Arab Spring, has strongly affected the Arab world. Regimes were ousted, elections were organized, and constitutions were changed. Arab Spring caught oil monarchies from the Persian Gulf by surprise, with civil unrests occurring with different character and intensity. The idea everywhere was the same– make

political systems more representative and transparent, or just a change in the political behavior of the elites, governing affected countries.

Bin Huwaidin differentiates three main threats raised from the Arab Spring events, potentially endangering the Gulf oil monarchies: political liberal ideas, political Islamic movement and sectarianism. In his view, these three elements are instigated by the Arab Spring, and pose essential threat to the conservative system of GCC states, originated in the paternalistic conservatism [7].

Conservative sociopolitical philosophy in Persian Gulf is dating since pre-state era, and is rooted deeply in the habits, tradition and culture of the people living there. Hence, at the moment the region is facing with some kind of identity crisis, where part of the younger generation, educated in the West are supporting the idea of more liberal society, while older generations cannot even imagine what this could look like and are opposing this idea. If the wider context is taken into account, with the oil price drop and Arab Spring events, the relevance of this question is additionally increasing. The ruling elites found themselves in a limbo situation for some period, not knowing how to react properly, but since then we are constantly noticing announcements for structural reforms in political and economic systems of their countries.

Witnessing the overthrow of several Arab regimes, the rulers of the oil monarchies suddenly had to find new ways of responding to the calls for reforms, and hence to legitimize their ruling under the new circumstances. Whether demonstrations had occurred or not during the Arab Spring, the monarchs of these countries reacted uniformly to suppress the riots by significant budget spending. Judging by the intensity of the protests, Bahrain and Oman were the two most affected countries. Each country was given \$10 billion from the other members of the GCC [8], to counter the storm, giving its citizens economic gifts by creating thousands additional jobs in the public sector, wages increases, better social packages etc.

However, redistributive mechanisms are not a sustainable solution in a long run. Bearing in mind the volatile political situation in the region, where conflicts are commonplace, followed by low oil prices and Arab Spring events, ruling monarchies feel the growing pressure from the society, forcing them to change something. In times when public trust is questioned, additional necessity of political legitimization is always welcomed. Hence, the importance of the elections in the post Arab Spring era arises.

Elections as a contemporary mechanism for legitimacy of the Gulf oil monarchies

According to Weber, there are three types of political legitimacy: traditional, charismatic and rational-legal [9]. Oil monarchies are legitimizing its ruling with the first type, which is typical for monarchy. Traditional legitimation is based on history of the authority of tradition, because “it has always existed”

and must continue. Oil monarchies want to include rational-legal type of legitimation by improving the electoral process. After the Arab Spring events, ruling elites in the Gulf oil monarchies felt the necessity to reconfirm their legitimacy, even though this is not asked out loud. However, this time they are willing to use elections as an instrument, beside the traditional religious legitimation. Although, elections are not held for the first time in their history, elections organized after the Arab Spring show signs of progress, although they are still lacking some fundamental elements in order to be considered as valid elections by the modern democratic standards.

Most of the elections were called ad-hoc after the Arab Spring, as the ruling elites recognized the potential threat from it. Nonneman describes the reforms undertaken to improve electoral process in Gulf oil monarchies as an attempt to guarantee that elections were fair, and to enhance the representative nature of the elected candidates, remaining in place the so called 'neo-traditional' mechanisms of consultation between rulers and citizens [10].

Even in the constitutional monarchies Kuwait and Bahrain, the Emir and the King respectively, retain the power to dissolve the National Assemblies and to veto laws. In Kuwait, National Assembly has 65 seats, of whom 50 are elected by popular vote, while up to 15 are appointed. Bahrain's National Assembly is bicameral with 80 seats and is consisted of two houses: Council of Representatives (lower house) with 40 elected members and Consultative Council (upper house) with 40 royally appointed members. Qatar has Advisory Council with 30 elected seats and 15 appointed seats by the Emir. Advisory Council can draft, and vote legislations, which could eventually become laws only with the two-thirds majority votes and the Emir's endorsement. UAE has Federal National Council with 40 seats, where 20 are appointed members and 20 are indirectly-elected. However, Federal Supreme Council is the highest constitutional, legislative and executive authority in UAE, consisted of 7 Emirs- rulers of each of the 7 Emirates. Oman has bicameral parliament called Council of Oman, composed of State Council (upper house) and the Consultation Council (lower house). Lower house has 84 elected members, while upper house has 83 members appointed by the Sultan. All decisions are taken on the basis of majority vote. Saudi Arabia has Consultative Assembly consisted of 150 members- all appointed by the King, with limited powers in government. It has the right to propose laws to the King, but it cannot pass or enforce laws, right retained only by the King.

Almost every relevant international human rights organization highlights the lack of civil and political liberties in GCC countries and major inconsistencies in the electoral process. Even though post Arab Spring electoral process was significantly improved compared to the period prior the Arab Spring, they still cannot be considered as valid elections, because they lack the real essence- citizens are still not included in the decision making (this right remains

exclusively for the monarchies). Zaccara examines the elections in three GCC countries: UAE, Oman and Kuwait and stresses the following deficiencies in the electoral process of the Gulf oil monarchies: lack of power attributed to elected institutions; low participation rates and low or none at all participation of women in the electoral process; limitations on independent candidatures; and failure of the political empowerment of women. [11]

Electoral process in Gulf oil monarchies plays the role of limited re-legitimizing mechanism for regimes confronted by their citizens after the Arab Spring and the drop of the oil prices. Although, the elections cannot include citizens in the decision making process, they do reflect some socio-political dynamics occurring after the Arab Spring. Improvement of the quasi elections in the oil monarchies of the Middle East, cannot remove the threats from civil unrests and are unable fully to legitimize the political power of the ruling elites. In times of globalization, the ruling elites would have to make structural reforms, enriching the very conservative and authoritarian political system with more liberal ideas.

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