

Politics, Education and Economies in the Arab Gulf States: Impact of 9/11 and Arab Uprisings



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Abstract: *In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States government intensified its calls for democratic reforms across the Arab world, marking a pivotal moment in the political evolution of the Arab Gulf states during the first decade of the 21st century. This increased pressure from the U.S. was followed by the Arab uprisings in the next decade that unfolded in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia, further compelling the Gulf governments to consider additional reforms. The combined impact of the 9/11 attacks and these revolutionary movements raised significant questions regarding their influence on the reform agendas of the Gulf region. This paper aims to explore the extent to which these external events shaped political reforms in the Gulf, focusing on the constitutional and legislative changes initiated by the governments of the Arab Gulf states. In the wake of 9/11, the Gulf countries embarked on a series of political adjustments, with several notable developments in their constitutional frameworks. These reforms, both reactive and proactive, reflected the shifting dynamics of governance in a region under both internal and external pressures for change.*

Keywords: 9/11; Arab uprisings; politics in the Arab Gulf States; education in the Gulf countries; Gulf economies

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the traditionally conservative Arab Gulf states have experienced two significant phases of reforms. Following the events of 9/11, the United States government intensified its emphasis on the need for democratic reforms across the Arab world. This shift marked a pivotal moment in the trajectory of political reforms in the Arab Gulf states during the first decade of the century. As part of this recalibrated approach, the “Freedom Agenda” became a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab Middle East, encompassing the Gulf states of Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. This external pressure, combined with rising domestic demands for social, political, and economic reforms, forced the Gulf monarchies to engage with the growing calls for change.

The governments of the Gulf region faced

similar pressures to implement further reforms in the wake of the Arab revolutions that challenged the ruling elites. The question arises: what impact did the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent uprisings in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Tunisia, and other Arab states have on the reform movement and agenda in the Gulf region? This paper aims to address this question by examining the reforms undertaken by the governments of the Arab Gulf States during this period of heightened political and social upheaval.

Literature Review

In his assessment of the reforms in Saudi Arabia, Kendall (2006) observed that, while progress appeared slow from a European perspective, from a Saudi viewpoint, significant changes were evident. After the departure of the Bush administration, a journalist for the *Financial Times* remarked in 2009 that the kingdom had

begun to open up since 2005 (Allam, 2009). Public statements from the Gulf Research Centre suggest that the ruling elite may have used external pressures to suppress Islamic movements that either opposed or expressed reservations about women's involvement and their ascent to leadership roles (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 74).

The literature indicates that smaller states were also subject to American influence and complied with the demands for reform. In the case of one such smaller state, Qatar, Kapiszewski and Ibrahim, the director of the Ibn Khaldun Centre, highlighted the connection between the actions of these regimes and the pressure exerted by the United States. According to Kapiszewski's analysis, Shaikh Hamad chose to increase his political engagement in Qatar for at least two reasons: to garner the support of younger Qataris and to cultivate alliances in the West (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 118). Reports from the Ibn Khaldun Centre suggest that the government's strategic decision to enhance its cooperative ties with the United States was a key factor driving the accelerated pace of reform (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2008).

By 2004, despite the relatively short period since the events of 9/11, observers began to recognise the benefits of U.S. government-sponsored democratisation initiatives in the Arab world. Some commentators praised the positive response from Gulf regimes to the Bush Administration's calls for democratic reform. Hayajneh observed that Arab states had agreed to operate within the framework set by the U.S., striving to meet its demands. Political reforms were introduced in several Arab countries, including Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, with the primary aim of avoiding U.S. military intervention. Although the pace and extent of reforms varied, the majority of Arab nations initiated some form of political engagement. However, these efforts were not driven by a deep belief in the importance of democracy; rather, they were a response to external pressure. Despite their prisons being filled with individuals demanding greater freedoms, the regimes did not prioritise

democratic reform on their own until 9/11. Their actions were motivated by the demands of the United States (Hayajneh, 2004).

Neep also highlights the pressure exerted by the U.S. government on the Gulf States' reform movements and its impact, noting that these states initiated reforms with a dual focus: enhancing regional stability and reaping the benefits provided by U.S. support for its allies (Neep, 2004). According to the Ibn Khaldun Center's Annual Report for 2004 (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2004), the U.S. stance on democratisation and respect for individual freedoms was undoubtedly a key driver behind the vigorous calls for democratic change within many Arab societies. Similar observations were made by experts globally in 2006. Among those in the Middle East, Fattah and Khalaf recognised the value of U.S. involvement and the ongoing reform process. Khalaf noted that, in the aftermath of 9/11, Gulf monarchies faced unprecedented demands for reform. For some time, most reformers within the ruling families had acknowledged the necessity of responding to both domestic and international calls for political change (Khalaf, 2006, pp. 33–34).

The Silent Revolution (Seikaly & Mattar, 2014) explores the impact of the Arab Spring on gender, sectarianism, citizenship, political engagement, and identity formation within Gulf communities. In a similar vein, Florence Gaub (2015) analyses the effects of the Arab uprisings on intergovernmental relations in the region. The author argues that domestic unrest has disrupted the activities of certain traditional regional actors, signalling that the region is undergoing a profound transformation. *Oil States in the New Middle East* (Selvik & Utvik, 2015) offers a critical re-evaluation of Rentier State Theory, investigating how oil-producing states have navigated and responded to the widespread upheavals brought about by the Arab Spring.

Constitutional, Judicial, and Political Developments

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Gulf monarchies undertook several constitutional reforms, with

Bahrain and Qatar leading the way. Bahrain introduced a new constitution in 2002, followed by Qatar, which implemented its constitution the following year. The distinction between the two constitutions lies in the level of popular approval. In Qatar, the constitution was enacted following an overwhelming referendum in April 2003, where 96% of voters, both men and women, endorsed it. In contrast, Bahrain's new constitution was essentially promulgated through the reinstatement of its 1973 Constitution (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 110). Both constitutions marked significant steps towards transforming the political structures of Bahrain and Qatar into constitutional monarchies. Notably, Bahrain's new constitution prohibits both physical and psychological abuse of prisoners, as well as any form of mistreatment (Parolin, 2006, p. 69). This provision enhances the sense of dignity and self-respect among the populace.

The principle of "separation of powers" was concretely established in the constitutions of both Bahrain and Qatar. In Bahrain, legislative authority was vested in a bicameral body consisting of the Nuwab Council (lower house) and the Shura Council (upper house). The Nuwab Council is an elected chamber, while the Shura Council serves as an appointed advisory body. Each chamber comprises forty members, with all adult citizens granted the right to vote for members of the lower house. Similarly, Qatar's constitution delineates distinct powers among the three branches of government. Executive power is exercised by the emir and his government, legislative authority is vested in the Shura Council, and judicial authority is held by the courts (Parolin, 2006, p. 70).

For the first time in Kuwait's history, the roles of prime minister and crown prince were separated, representing a significant step forward in the process of power separation. This division subjects the prime minister to parliamentary oversight and opens the position to potential judicial scrutiny (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 104). These reforms are crucial for fostering institutional development, promoting good governance, and enhancing transparency. In Bahrain, for example, nearly three decades

had passed without legislative elections, yet the new constitution mandated the holding of such elections, marking a pivotal moment in the country's political evolution.

Although the referendum in Qatar occurred in 2003, the constitution was formally adopted and proclaimed by the Emir in June 2004 (Parolin, 2006, p. 70). The new constitution established a 45-member parliament and laid the foundation for universal suffrage. Following the Shura Council's approval of the election law in May 2008, Qataris aged 18 and older were granted the right to vote, with direct and secret ballots officially enshrined in law (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 42). The Shura Council also gained the authority to review and amend the draft budget (Parolin, 2006, p. 71). Previously composed of 35 appointed members and lacking legislative power, the Shura Council was restructured to include 45 members, 30 of whom are elected and 15 appointed.

A measure in Qatar attains legislative status following the Emir's approval, contingent upon receiving a two-thirds majority from the Shura Council (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyyah, 2008). This Council is responsible for approving the national budget and overseeing all governmental operations. Furthermore, it possesses the authority to question ministers and mandate their dismissal through a vote of no confidence. The rights and liberties of the Qatari populace are enshrined in the nation's recent constitution, which includes provisions for the right to assemble and establish associations. The constitution also guarantees an independent judiciary, freedom of expression, and accommodations for religious practices (Kapiszewski, 2006, pp. 117–118). Amendments that would infringe upon an individual's constitutionally protected freedoms and rights are explicitly prohibited. Jamal Yahya has remarked that this new constitution is among the most progressive in the Arab world ("Qatar - Shaikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani,," 2007). Moreover, the establishment of the Supreme Constitutional Court by the Qatari emir marks a significant advancement in the country's constitutional development.

The Economist ("Tiptoeing towards Reform,"

2009) projected that, following King Abdullah's reforms in February 2009, the council would likely select a successor to Abdullah, potentially marking the first quasi-democratic transfer of power in Saudi Arabian history. However, this scenario did not materialize. King Abdullah undertook the significant measure of replacing conservative judges in Saudi courts with those more amenable to reform (Allam, 2009). Additionally, a conservative justice was removed from his position ("Senior Saudi Calls for Political Reforms," 2009). In February 2009, the King dismissed Sheikh Saleh Luhaydan, the head of the Supreme Judicial Council, along with several other high-ranking judges. Luhaydan had become notorious for his rulings, which included a declaration that it was permissible to kill the owners of television networks deemed to promote "immorality" ("Senior Saudi Calls for Political Reforms," 2009).

In the Gulf countries, political sector reforms and adjustments emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. The Ibn Khaldun Centre for Development Studies issued the 2008 Annual Report entitled "Civil Society and Democratisation in the Arab World," which categorizes Kuwait as a "constitutional hereditary emirate," Bahrain and Qatar as "constitutional monarchies," and Saudi Arabia as an "absolute monarchy" (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2008, pp. 27–28). Alongside several other countries in the Middle East, Kuwait was accepted into the Community of Democracies forum (Youngs, 2005, p. 70).

While some of these trends have since reversed, the momentum generated by these reforms continues to exert influence in certain areas. Legislative and electoral politics have notably benefited, with several states now exhibiting relatively participatory political systems. This modest wave of political pluralism has initiated significant transformations within the region. It has been observed that the electoral politics of the Gulf countries have historically expanded in the post-9/11 period, a development facilitated by constitutional advancements in the region (Parolin, 2006, p. 80). Following the US government's declaration of a policy to promote

democracy in the Middle East after 9/11, elections were conducted for the first time in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman. In 2007, Qatar also held its inaugural parliamentary elections.

A wave of popular voting has emerged across the Gulf region (Parolin 2006, 80). As elections began to be held in these nations, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar inspired optimism among democrats regarding the potential for political liberalization (Stepan & Robertson, 2003, p. 37). In the Gulf states, there has been a discernible trend of increasing voter engagement in political processes. For example, in certain municipalities in Qatar, voter turnout for the municipal council elections in 2003 ranged from 25 to 35 percent. Notably, this figure rose to 51 percent during the city council elections held in April 2007. Among these countries, Kuwait was the first to conduct elections, with its inaugural parliamentary elections taking place in 1962. Qatar held its first elections in 2007, followed by the United Arab Emirates in 2006, Saudi Arabia in 2005, Oman in 2003, and Bahrain in 2002.

Following its dissolution in 1975, Bahrain's parliament became a part of the nation's history (The Free Library, 2003). The parliament was reestablished in 2002, coinciding with the government's first round of legislative elections. That same year also marked the country's inaugural municipal elections, in which thirty-two candidates competed for fifty municipal seats. The municipal and parliamentary elections were regarded as free and fair, largely due to the opposition's active campaigns, which included substantial demonstrations even from those political associations that chose to boycott the elections. In the parliamentary elections, one hundred and seventy-seven candidates contended for forty seats (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2008). In 2003, Oman held its first parliamentary elections based on universal franchise (Valeri 2006, 197; Kechichian 2005, 53). The United Arab Emirates conducted its first election in 2006, during which twenty members of the Federal National Council were elected, while the government appointed an additional twenty members (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-

Inmā'iyah, 2008, p. 199).

In 2003, the King of Saudi Arabia instituted local councils, with the intention that the public would elect fifty percent of the municipal members (Parolin, 2006, p. 82). The administration conducted its first elections for 178 municipal councils in 2005, which were marked by intense competition. In Riyadh, for example, 646 candidates contested for seven available seats, resulting in a voter turnout that ranged between 25 and 35 percent. The Saudi municipal elections garnered significant attention from the public and have thus far contributed to elevating reform discussions within the public sphere. On one hand, these elections established a precedent for pluralistic contestation within existing consultative bodies (Hamzawy, 2007). Observers suggest that the decision to organize municipal elections in 2005 was influenced by the positive electoral experiences of neighboring Bahrain and Qatar (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 94). In certain instances, liberal candidates were notably successful, gaining traction within the electoral campaigns and power structures of the Gulf monarchies. For example, seven liberal candidates emerged victorious from a total of fifty in the National Assembly elections held in Kuwait in May 2008.

Although political parties are prohibited across all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, certain regimes, such as those in Bahrain and Kuwait, permit the existence of political clubs and societies (Center for International Private Enterprise, n.d.). By 2008, Bahrain had approximately fifteen political societies that functioned similarly to political parties, fielding candidates in elections and organizing blocs within the parliament (Parolin, 2006, p. 75). These political groups encompass a range of ideologies, including liberalism, Marxism, leftism, and fundamentalism. The Bahraini government allows these organizations to publish weekly journals and conduct public forums (Center for International Private Enterprise, n.d.). In a significant historical moment in 2004, leaders of Bahrain's political societies publicly opposed a draft law concerning political societies. With the assistance of the National Democratic Institute,

they developed an alternative proposal to the suggested legislation. This revised legislation was ultimately enacted in July 2005 after being presented to the Nuwab Council (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, n.d.).

Before November 2003, the Saudi Consultative Council functioned solely as an advisory body. However, a royal decree elevated its status to include limited legislative authority, enabling its members to propose new legislation (Kapiszewski, 2006, pp. 96–97). In 2005, the Council's powers were further expanded through an amendment to Article 17 of its regulations. Previously, the cabinet was the sole recipient of the decisions and recommendations issued by the Consultative Council; the revision allowed the Council to present its recommendations directly to the king. Additionally, a modification to Article 23 of the regulatory framework granted Council members further legislative authority (Hamzawy, 2007). As a result of these changes, in 2005, members of the Saudi Consultative Council were empowered to question cabinet members, engage in discussions regarding the national budget, and access information concerning state revenue (Kapiszewski, 2006, pp. 96–97).

In April 2005, the number of seats in the Saudi Consultative Council was increased from 120 to 150. This expansion of membership reflects the government's commitment to reforms. Notably, two-thirds of the new appointments were made from among distinguished experts in economics and education (*Jordan Times* cited in Stracke 2006, 26). As a result of this broadened mandate and more diverse composition, the Council has assumed a more prominent role in Saudi Arabian politics. Amr Hamzawy remarked that these developments may not appear as momentous as political changes occurring in other Arab nations, they signify a substantial shift within Saudi Arabia's authoritarian political landscape (Hamzawy, 2007).

In contrast to their prior functions, parliaments and other legislative bodies in the Gulf states have become increasingly assertive. These legislative institutions have begun to actively assert their authority and influence. For

example, in 2006, the parliament of Kuwait impeached the emir. Furthermore, the Kuwaiti parliament modifies the bills presented by the government, thereby limiting the powers of the cabinet (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyyah, 2008). Similarly, a parliamentary committee in Bahrain rejected a government-sponsored bill intended to regulate open forums and public demonstrations. The committee deemed the proposed legislation unlawful, citing concerns that it would infringe upon the rights and liberties of citizens (Kapiszewski, 2006, pp. 114–115).

In January 2004, the Bahraini Council of Deputies established a precedent for parliamentary accountability when it interrogated three ministers: the Minister of State, the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Labor (Khalaf 2004 cited in Kapiszewski 2006, 113). This bold action may have contributed to Bahrain's acceptance into the International Parliamentary Union in 2003 (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyyah, 2008). In 2005, members of the Saudi Consultative Council engaged in discussions regarding women's rights to drive in Saudi Arabia (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 92). The Consultative Council has thereby demonstrated its significance and has substantially expanded the legislative landscape (Hertog, 2006, p. 241).

Several Gulf monarchies utilized official media to disseminate information on various topics. In 2003, the Saudi government announced its intention to broadcast Consultative Council meetings on public television, marking the first instance in Saudi Arabian history of such a decision to air the weekly sessions of the Council (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 96). Prior to this, Oman had chosen to broadcast question-and-answer sessions of the Majlis al-Shura, thereby leading the way in media engagement even before Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, certain sessions of the Majlis al-Shura were also aired on television (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 121; Sakr, 2006, p. 137).

In the context of political reforms in the Arab Gulf states during the first decade of the current century, the increased emphasis by the American government on the necessity for

democratic changes in the Arab world following 9/11 emerged as a pivotal moment. The upheavals experienced in neighboring Arab countries at the onset of the second decade further motivated the Gulf region to pursue more profound democratic reforms.

The Arab uprisings, which led to a new political system in Tunisia, ongoing civil conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and a military takeover in Egypt, served as a significant warning for the GCC monarchies (Zaccara & Battaloglu, 2023, p. 114). The ramifications of the "Arab Spring" were profound and could not be overlooked by the Gulf monarchies for an extended period. This wave of democratization occurred in close proximity, rendering the prevention of political reforms in the Arab Gulf states increasingly untenable (Abdullah, 2011).

Consequently, the GCC states implemented a stick-and-carrot approach, addressing certain demands while suppressing others in an effort to mitigate the impact of public grievances. This strategy included a combination of economic reforms and redistributive policies. In Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, direct cash handouts were provided, while Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman created additional public sector jobs for national citizens. Furthermore, there were increases in wages and benefits for nationals. The establishment of "national visions" aimed at enacting comprehensive economic reforms across all GCC states, alongside various economic initiatives and discussions concerning taxation, economic diversification, and the nationalization of the labor force, were also introduced (Zaccara & Battaloglu, 2023, p. 114).

Following the Arab revolutions, more political reforms were enacted, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates implementing electoral changes. In Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, only slight institutional modifications occurred. Notable among these were revisions to the UAE's citizenship law, which granted rights to children of national women who marry foreigners, as well as adjustments to Qatar's permanent residency laws for specific nationalities. Additionally, there was a strengthening of national identity policies that

contradicted previous support for a unified Khaliji identity.

Despite the ongoing efforts of nations such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman to establish parliamentary democracy, the Gulf region has generally exhibited a preference for autocratic governance. However, this comfort with the status quo is rapidly diminishing. After decades of political stagnation, forces of change are finally beginning to challenge established norms. The collective demand for freedom, political reform, democratization, dignity, and the eradication of corruption unites the various movements of dissent. This marks a significant contrast to the previous fifty years, during which the forces supporting the status quo appeared remarkably resilient (Abdullah, 2011).

Traditional politics in the Gulf region have undergone significant transformation in response to the rapid developments associated with flourishing oil economies. This evolution has been influenced by several factors, including societal expansion, the establishment of complex administrative frameworks, the diversification of relationships among community members, and the shift from traditional patron-client dynamics to connections grounded in professional interests, education, and occupation (Abraham, 2015).

Foreign workers continue to encounter significant challenges in achieving equal rights in the workplace. For instance, the 3.6 million migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, predominantly comprising domestic workers and farmers, remain among the most vulnerable and least protected. This situation persists despite the recent measures aimed at easing restrictions on migrant workers (Khan, 2023, p. 819). Foreign workers constitute over 75% of the workforce in the GCC states, contributing to 70% of the region's \$2 trillion GDP ("After Decades of Empty Talk, Reforms in Gulf States Are Real—but Risky," 2023). Furthermore, governments often neglect to implement legislation accompanied by effective mechanisms for monitoring and ensuring compliance. Consequently, without accountability for employers, such policies remain largely ineffectual (Khan, 2023, p. 819).

Education and Economic Sectors

Fattah emphasizes that the education sector is a critical factor to consider when discussing democracy and democratization globally. He argues that individuals with higher levels of education tend to find it easier to understand the workings of democracies in other countries, which makes them more inclined to support democratic principles (Fattah, 2006, p. 40). Therefore, discussions of the reforms undertaken by Gulf monarchs following September 11, 2001, must include, at least in part, the changes made within the education system. The ruling regimes of the GCC countries did not completely neglect this sector; indeed, some educational reforms were enacted in several states.

Shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, the rulers convened in Doha in 2002 to discuss education and its reforms. The Arab Gulf governments faced criticism from the United States and the international community, which accused their educational systems of fostering radicalism among the youth. A report by RAND clearly indicated that the United States must actively advocate for and fully support educational reform, encompassing curricula, teachers, and institutions (Alhouti, 2023, p. 75). Thus, the need for education reform was both widely acknowledged.

In March 2002, the religious elite in Saudi Arabia lost their exclusive authority over the education of girls. This shift included the introduction of English as a subject in earlier grades. Furthermore, the king replaced conservative officials in the Ministry of Education with more progressive and proactive individuals (Allam, 2009; Gause III, 2009; Stracke, 2006, p. 21). In the same year, the Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates implemented a strategy to oversee educational reforms. Local committees were established with the objective of reviewing school textbooks to eliminate any content containing derogatory or discriminatory language (Al-Sayegh, 2004, p. 120). Education constitutes a key element of Vision 2030's development plan, which seeks to modernize the educational system in order to leverage the

intellectual capacity of Saudi Arabians for achieving specified developmental goals (Bilan, 2024).

Over the past two decades, the region has become increasingly reliant on external consultants. These predominantly Western consulting firms are granted unrestricted access to all educational environments, including institutions of higher education. They also benefit from access to policy reports and data from the ruling authorities, which provides them with the political backing necessary to conduct their evaluations. In contrast, native educators and academics are often denied similar access and support, suggesting a lack of confidence in their capacity to implement reforms (Alhouti, 2023, pp. 88–89).

Given the state's limited human resources and domestic expertise, it was justifiable to depend on foreign consultants during the establishment of the education system in the 1940s and 1950s, a period when most Arab Gulf states adopted educational models from Egypt and other Arab nations. Despite numerous studies that challenge this reliance and critique the policy borrowing approach, the ruling authorities continue to favor foreign consultants, viewing this practice as a non-negotiable aspect of their strategy. Whenever challenges arise within the educational system, these states promptly seek assistance from foreign consultants, requesting them to diagnose issues and propose solutions, even in instances where contextual knowledge is lacking. In certain cases, such as that involving RAND in Qatar, the consultants are tasked with evaluating their own interventions (Alhouti, 2023, p. 89).

In *The Future of Freedom*, Zakaria underscores the critical role of a free economy in establishing and strengthening liberal democracy. He argues that the most significant catalyst for change in the Middle East will be the emergence of a genuinely enterprising business class, which will subsequently influence the broader society. He contends that economic reforms are paramount and should be prioritized (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 152–153). Following the newly awakened dynamism among the region's populace, the expansion of the middle class has

fostered a robust private sector, which has played a vital role in amplifying public demand for reform (Center for International Private Enterprise, n.d.).

Bahrain and Oman established free trade agreements (FTAs) with the United States, while Kuwait and the United States formalized the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) in 2005. In 2007, the United States and the United Arab Emirates furthered their cooperation by signing the TIFA-Plus agreement. Notably, following the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, labor unions were legally recognized for the first time in Bahrain (Wittes & Yerkes, 2006, p. 7). It has been observed that the private sectors in the Gulf countries have grown sufficiently to contribute to regional demands for reform (Center for International Private Enterprise, n.d.). Nevertheless, it remains evident that in the MENA region, political and economic liberalization do not always occur in tandem (Bilan, 2024).

In recent years, Gulf nations have initiated the process of dismantling certain fundamental aspects of the Kafala system. In 2020, Qatar emerged as the first country to grant migrant workers the freedom to resign or change employers. Following this, both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia implemented similar measures after a year. By 2021, all GCC countries, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, allowed migrant workers to leave without requiring the consent of their employers (Khan, 2023, p. 819).

In 2015, the United Arab Emirates eliminated fuel subsidies. Although fuel prices remain relatively low on a global scale, they are approximately thirty percent higher than in Saudi Arabia and around 150 percent higher than in Kuwait. Many Gulf states have raised their water and electricity tariffs, which were previously set well below market rates. After maintaining unchanged electricity prices for thirty-three years, Oman removed its discount for citizens, requiring them to pay the same rates as foreign residents. Similar to other Gulf nations, the UAE is actively encouraging businesses to increase the employment of local citizens. Companies are now required to fill 2%

of their workforce with Emiratis, with this percentage set to rise annually until it reaches 10% by the end of 2026. Beginning January 1, 2023, companies that fail to employ an Emirati will incur a penalty of 6,000 dirhams per month. It is important to note that not all Emiratis avoid such positions (“After Decades of Empty Talk, Reforms in Gulf States Are Real—but Risky,” 2023).

Emiratis express grievances on social media regarding foreign nationals occupying the most desirable positions. In turn, foreigners often accuse locals of being pampered and lacking ambition. Such tensions were rare in previous decades, as there was minimal incentive for interaction between the two groups. However, some locals now find themselves unprepared as they navigate increased competition in the contemporary landscape (“After Decades of Empty Talk, Reforms in Gulf States Are Real—but Risky,” 2023).

Conclusion

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the Gulf states undertook several political reforms and made adjustments within their respective sectors. Notable constitutional developments occurred, particularly in Bahrain and Qatar. Bahrain introduced a new constitution in 2002, while Qatar implemented its own the following year. Both constitutions articulated the principle of “separation of powers.” In Bahrain, this was manifested through a bicameral legislative body endowed with authority over the legislative branch. Although a referendum in Qatar took place in 2003, the Emir formally ratified and issued the constitution in June 2004. In Qatar, for a bill to become law, it has to first receive the endorsement of a two-thirds majority in the Shura Council, after which the Emir signs it into effect.

The concept of popular voting has gradually expanded throughout the Gulf region. Following its dissolution in 1975, Bahrain’s parliament had become a historical footnote until its reestablishment in 2002, coinciding with the government’s inaugural legislative elections. In 2003, the king of Saudi Arabia initiated the formation of local councils, allowing voters to

elect fifty percent of the municipal representatives. While political parties remain prohibited across all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, certain regimes, such as those in Bahrain and Kuwait, permit the existence of political clubs and societies. Prior to November 2003, the Saudi Consultative Council functioned solely as an advisory body; however, a royal decree subsequently elevated its status, granting it limited legislative authority. Legislative bodies and parliaments have emerged as more vigorous and assertive entities than in previous years. Notably, in January 2004, the Bahraini Council of Deputies established a framework for a new parliamentary assertiveness following the interrogation of three ministers.

In the context of political reforms in the Arab Gulf states during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the United States government’s intensified focus on the necessity for democratic reforms in the Arab world following the events of September 11, 2001, marked a turning point. Traditional political structures in the Gulf region have undergone an evolution, influenced by the rapid developments associated with the region’s expanding oil industries. There exists a growing demand for greater freedoms among the younger generation, the middle class, and the international community at large. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, leaders convened in Doha in 2002 to discuss educational reforms. Notably, in March 2002, the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia relinquished its monopoly over women’s education, leading to the introduction of English as a subject in earlier grades within the national curriculum.

In recent years, Gulf nations have initiated the process of dismantling certain critical aspects of the Kafala system. Despite some reversal of trends, the momentum generated by these reforms persists in various areas. The political upheavals experienced by neighboring Arab governments at the onset of the second decade of the twenty-first century further motivated the Gulf region to pursue more democratic reforms.

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