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Workshop Summary

Kuwait Study Group: The Experience of Parliamentary Politics in the GCC

Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme in partnership with the Gulf University for Science and Technology

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INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of discussions that took place at a roundtable discussion held in February 2012 at the Gulf Centre for Policy Studies at the Gulf University of Science and Technology in Kuwait City. Part of Chatham House's 'Future Trends in the GCC' research project, the discussion brought together a group of academics, civil society representatives, entrepreneurs, journalists and bloggers from different GCC countries to discuss some of the key trends shaping GCC politics, with a focus on parliamentary politics, political engagement and youth movements. A subsequent discussion addressed trends in identity politics and the politics of sectarianism in the GCC.¹

Key points that emerged from the discussions, in the views of participants, included:

- The concept of citizenship will eventually need to be renegotiated across the GCC states as a result of generational and economic changes. The social contract should evolve to develop the role of citizens as partners in the country, rather than economic beneficiaries. For their part, states need to understand that the status quo is neither politically nor economically sustainable in the medium to long term.
- States should learn from watching the experience of other Arab countries that there can be a never-ending game of catch-up between what citizens demand and what states are prepared to give; for instance, Syria has offered constitutional concessions that were barely thought of 18 months ago, but that now seem to be too little, too late. In the GCC, there has often been a tendency to delay political reforms at times of economic plenty – yet the cost of reforms will be greater if they are delayed until times of hardship. Reforming early and pre-emptively will be to states' long-term advantage.
- The traditional representation and consultation systems developed by GCC states reflect traditional, historical social structures, such as tribes and religious leaders, who do not need parliaments to reach the rulers. However, as society is changing, there are important constituencies such as young people, women, naturalized citizens

¹ Kuwait Study Group: Identity, Citizenship and Sectarianism in the GCC, Meeting Summary <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/183415>

and expatriate workers who lack meaningful representation. Governments and societies need to find ways for these groups to be represented, possibly through more empowered parliaments, so they can be consulted and can have peaceful, accepted means to voice their concerns.

- Some GCC states are facing economic pressures for change earlier than others. Part of the explanation for the uprisings in Bahrain and Oman is that these states have to make the transition to post-rentier economies ahead of others because their limited energy resources are in long-term decline and they cannot afford to provide the standards of living that citizens of other GCC countries expect. Bahrain has responded by limiting rentier privileges to a relatively small elite, most of whom are Sunni; protests have been led by those who feel they are excluded from this bargain, while counter-protests are now being led by Sunnis who fear that the government will renegotiate the social contract to their disadvantage.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants (although not all participants will necessarily agree with the views cited). This document is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

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SESSION 1: THE KUWAITI EXPERIENCE

The 2012 parliamentary elections

Kuwait has a stronger tradition of parliamentary politics and free debate than any other country in the Gulf. The Kuwaiti experience of parliamentary politics therefore has a major effect on the way in which people in the Gulf states perceive parliaments and democracy. Shortly before the workshop, on 4 February, Kuwaiti nationals went to the polls for the fourth time in six years; the frequent occurrence of elections underscores the propensity for disputes between the relatively strong and outspoken legislature and the executive branch of government. This year's election was called as a result of a confrontation between Kuwait's then opposition – now the parliamentary majority – and the former prime minister, Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah. The results of the elections have widely been seen as a landslide victory for Islamists, but a participant argued this was perhaps overstated as Islamists now made up about half of the parliament but did not constitute a single united group. The number of MPs from the Muslim Brotherhood has risen from one to five (out of 50) and the number of salafist MPs has risen from two to five; in addition, there are four Shia Islamist MPs and a number of Islamist MPs representing major tribes. One of the setbacks in the election was that there are no longer any women in the Kuwaiti parliament; the four female MPs who were elected in the previous parliament all lost their seats, and the rulers opted not to appoint any women to the cabinet.

Although there are no official political parties in Kuwait, at least 12 different political blocs can be identified. They perform some of the functions of parties: the government and the prime minister negotiate with them, and they are free to officially announce their electoral candidates before an election.

From 1963 to 2009 there were various structural changes and reforms to the system, including:

- The granting of the right to vote to women in 2005, nearly doubling the size of the electorate;
- The reduction of the number of constituencies from 25 to five in 2006, a move that democracy campaigners hoped would reduce the incidence of corruption and vote-buying;

- The constitutional court's cancellation in 2006 of the 'Law of Gatherings' that had restricted political protests;
- The *de facto* separation of the positions of the prime minister and the Crown Prince since 2003 (although this is not a constitutional requirement, but followed the onset of health issues that had made the former prime minister and Crown Prince unable to continue in his role).

Participants also noted as a positive sign the fact that the prime minister is no longer immune from criticism. The previous prime minister's acceptance of parliamentary scrutiny – which resulted in his narrowly surviving a vote of no confidence in 2011 – was said to be a significant milestone for Kuwaiti politics.

However, despite these developments, many Kuwaitis have been disappointed in the performance and achievements of parliament. It was said that some regard the parliament as an obstruction to economic development. It was seen as being slow to approve development projects. A participant expressed concern that there was a 'cancer of rent-seeking behaviour' in the Gulf, including fiscally irresponsible choices by both parliament and government, and asked if there could be ways to protect the interests of 'the absent stakeholder, the future generations' who were losing out as a result of the rapid depletion of oil wealth.

Proponents of the view that the parliament is to blame for holding back economic development tended to point to the UAE and Qatar, neither of which has a parliament but both of which have seen rapid economic development over the past decade. Conversely, other participants argued that democracy should not be seen as a hindrance to development, but as an essential part of a broader concept of human development, 'which includes healthcare security, education security and the ability to float your problems openly through free speech'. Another said that Kuwait records more of its oil revenue in the official budget than any other Gulf country. A participant added that merchant families sometimes act to block economic reform – meaning liberalization and opening up to greater competition – for fear it would threaten their own established positions.

Few participants expected the new parliament to last much longer than its predecessors. On the positive side, four political blocs are represented, which may mean there is more room for constructive negotiation than in previous parliaments. These had a larger number of independent MPs, who are often preoccupied with their individual agendas. The cabinet has announced the

establishment of two new institutions that democracy campaigners have sought for years: the 'Anti-Corruption Institution' and an election commission. A participant argued these should be complemented by an independent human rights commission. It was said that if these institutions were set up and well implemented, they would free up MPs to concentrate on legislation and on oversight of the government (at present, MPs spend a lot of time trading accusations of corruption and vote-rigging).

However, the relationship between the parliament and the cabinet, which does not include representatives of the parliamentary majority, is likely to remain fraught. There is a high chance that independent MPs in particular will increase tensions and cause deadlock, leading to the eventual collapse of parliament. The current volatile regional situation is also likely to be a source of political tensions within Kuwait.

Participants discussed what reforms could be brought in to create a more positive relationship between parliament and government. A participant noted that the parliament's new-found ability to question the prime minister had boosted the power of elected MPs, but in a negative way, as the only way for parliament to show its muscle was to question the authority of ministers, whereas it was not given a role in approving the government. There had been hints before the cabinet was formed that some of the ministries normally reserved for royals would be given to non-royals, but this had not happened. There had also been rumours that the deputy prime minister might be appointed from outside the ruling Al Sabah family, but this idea seems to have been quashed by opposition within the family. The parliamentary majority bloc had asked for nine ministries but was offered only three, so it refused to take any of them.² Participants in the workshop criticized both the government and the parliamentary majority for failing to compromise. On the one hand, it was said that the royal family was resisting pressure to share power, although it was also suggested that there were significant differences of opinion within the family on this issue. (Divisions within the royal family often play out in parliament, and a participant suggested that royals were also fighting with each other indirectly through the media.) On the other hand, a participant suggested that the parliamentary majority must have known the request for nine ministries would not be accepted and that it should have taken a more gradual approach.

² However, one independent opposition MP did accept the role of minister of state for housing and parliamentary affairs.

Nevertheless, it was said that one of the core themes of the Arab Spring was the demand for people to have a greater share in power. While Kuwait was the most democratic of the Gulf states, it would face further pressure to give elected representatives a role in the government. In Kuwait, the government has twice suspended parliament for lengthy periods, but has always brought it back; a participant said that for a largely urban population, elections had come to replace traditional tribal forms of allegiance.

Many participants noted that a major obstacle to the democratic process in Kuwait has been the high level of corruption among members of parliament. Thirteen MPs have been taken to court on corruption charges in the past year. Seven of them decided not to run in the elections and four lost their seats; only two were re-elected. Participants noted that an anti-corruption law was desperately needed in order to restore public confidence in the democratic process. A participant said that Kuwait was no more corrupt than other neighbouring countries, but that the relatively free media meant corruption was more visible and more discussed than in other countries.

Some participants felt that the Gulf media, most of which is owned by royals or by allies of ruling families, had an agenda to 'hype up the dysfunction of the Kuwaiti parliament' to discourage others in the Gulf from demanding a greater say in their own countries. A participant stated that Kuwait's democracy is unique to the country and is not necessarily a model for other Gulf states, each of which has its own distinctive history and particular traditions of relations between the ruling family and the population. Another said that Kuwaiti democracy was not a product to market to other countries, but was rather the 'natural behaviour' of Kuwaitis. Others argued that other monarchies would also need to convince their people that they were serious about power-sharing if they were to be sustainable in the longer term.

In closing, participants noted that a number of issues still needed to be addressed:

- The fact that there have been 30 different governments in 50 years has created instability in the political and economic system, and Kuwait needs to find ways for its parliament and government to work together more positively, rather than the legislature being the *de facto* opposition to the executive.
- MPs should find ways to cooperate with youth groups and need to pay more attention to the needs of younger and future generations.

- Judicial independence needs to be strengthened further and corruption laws need to be tightened. Civil society campaigners are highlighting both issues and are doing groundwork that MPs can draw on.
- One participant suggested Kuwait should highlight its relatively democratic environment when seeking to attract international investment.
- It was also suggested that voters should place more pressure on their MPs to deliver on economic development.

SESSION 2: PARLIAMENT AND STREET IN THE GCC

The Bahraini experience

A participant gave a brief history of the Bahraini parliament, which is less powerful today than it was in the 1970s. After independence in 1971, the Emir of Bahrain drew up a draft for a constitutional assembly in which approximately 55% of members were elected. After months of debate, a constitution based on the Kuwaiti model was passed, with two-thirds of the assembly being elected. The assembly had oversight powers for the national budget. After two years, however, parliament was dissolved and a state of national emergency was introduced. Despite numerous petitions for the reinstatement of constitutional rule, the country remained in a state of national emergency for 25 years. In 2001, a referendum was held that approved constitutional amendments including the reinstatement of an elected parliament, but with an advisory upper house, appointed directly by the king. The following year, however, the king introduced a new constitution that diluted the powers of elected MPs and gave the royally appointed MPs the authority to block the lower chamber. Voting boundaries were also altered, meaning that in some, mainly Shia-populated, districts up to 16,000 people vote for a single seat whereas in others it is as few as 750 people.

Initially the country's main opposition group, Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, boycotted the weakened parliament, but from 2006 to 2011 it opted to take part, hoping it could push for change within the system. However, little progress was made. In 2011, mass protests called for changes to the system of government, including the resignation of the prime minister, a member of the ruling family who has held his seat for over four decades (making him the world's longest-serving premier), an end to gerrymandering and an elected government. After protestors were killed in a government clampdown, Al-Wefaq's 18 MPs all resigned from parliament. In the resulting by-elections turnout was just 17%, which was seen as an indication of the low levels of public confidence in the parliament as an avenue for resolving the country's political crisis.

Parliament versus street

It was said that the Bahraini opposition is now broadly divided into two camps, which a participant called 'revolutionary' – referring to Al-Wefaq and allied opposition societies that are seeking to negotiate constitutional reforms to strengthen elected representation under a constitutional monarchy – and 'revolutionary', referring to more radical groups that no longer believe the regime is capable of reforming and are therefore seeking the overthrow of the monarchy. These groups have been gaining ground in Bahrain since late February 2011, forming a loose opposition youth movement that brings together under the broad banner of 'February 14th' a number of separate, localized groups, which a participant described as 'affinity groups' rather than a centrally controlled network. This movement has sought to develop more creative approaches to protest and mobilization than the traditional parties. A participant said that February 14th could mobilize crowds within 30 minutes through Blackberry Messenger and Facebook. However, it was suggested that the revolutionaries have yet to define a clear vision on some important issues – for instance, a participant asked, what would establishing a republic mean for Bahrain's relations with its neighbours?

The revolutionary opposition has largely engaged in peaceful forms of direct confrontation with the state, but in recent months there has been an increasing use of violence against the police by a minority of disaffected youth. Participants noted that Shia Bahrainis are largely excluded from the police and that Sunni Muslims are recruited instead from other countries, such as Pakistan. It was said that this needed to be addressed as part of efforts to ensure that Shia Bahrainis are included as equals, but a participant also noted that Bahrainis who opposed the uprising now saw this *de facto* policy as having been vindicated: 'Look what they are doing in the street, how can you give them guns?' There remains a major gap of understanding between the opposition and the supporters of the government.

Participants suggested that the traditional parties such as Al-Wefaq are gradually losing ground to the more revolutionary youth movements. Al-Wefaq is struggling to tread a middle ground; it does not always want to endorse street protests, and notably did not support the calls for a return to the Pearl Square site (the centre of the 2011 protests, now bulldozed and permanently guarded by police) on the anniversary of the uprising, because it was hoping to commence a new dialogue with the royal court.

Pro-government groupings also vary in their approaches. Some, like the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Menbar and salafist Asala, participate in parliament; others, such as the Al Fateh youth movement, focus more on

street rallies and online activities. In some ways this mirrors the generational divide in the opposition. A participant said that the Al Fateh youth movement was now accusing some of the 'original leaders of the counter-revolution' of being co-opted by the government.

Views from the rest of the GCC

Elsewhere in the GCC, many still view the Bahraini uprising as the product of Iranian involvement, a narrative routinely employed by the Gulf media, despite no evidence having been found by the royally appointed Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which looked into events that occurred during February and March 2011. A participant said that there had initially been a lot of support for the uprising among UAE intellectuals, who saw the opposition's demands as being moderate and secular. However, it was said that Gulf media coverage of the protests had changed significantly just before GCC troops were sent in and 'unfortunately, some people started playing the sectarian card'. A participant noted that pictures had been distributed by Gulf media showing protesters with Hizbollah flags, carrying knives (images not observed by the many Western and international journalists present at the protests). 'The moment the sectarian discourse started, everyone [in the UAE] was with the [Bahraini] government,' said one participant.

It was said that people in the UAE believed Iran was using the protests to encroach on the GCC, which they saw as a red line. One participant noted that Iran's continuing occupation of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, three UAE islands, had helped to shape the way Emiratis perceived the developments in Bahrain and had encouraged them to believe that the protests were Iranian-backed. Another participant noted that Saudi Arabia had lost two of its key allies in the region – Saad Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon, and Hosni Mubarak, the former prime minister of Egypt – in the month before the protests in Bahrain, which added to its anxiety about the unrest in an ally and neighbour. It was said by another participant that in Kuwait most of the people who supported the Bahraini government supported the Syrian protests, and vice versa – reflecting political and sectarian leanings rather than a consistent approach to democracy and human rights.

In the UAE, a participant said, there was some suspicion of street movements, whether in Bahrain, Egypt or elsewhere. Leaderless movements involving many anonymous activists might have developed in response to state repression, but their clandestine nature created uncertainty; 'Who are they, what do they want?'. It was said that there was no 'Arab street' in the UAE, in terms of a physical space for mobilization, but that some people

talked about a 'virtual street' in the form of social media. Public engagement with the elections for the Federal National Council – which involved just 29,000 hand-picked voters – had been low and it was said that many Emiratis did not know the names of Council members. Tribal affiliations were important in determining voting decisions. The UAE's generous welfare state was seen as affecting its political culture. 'UAE politics is more naïve,' a participant said 'and for us 2011 was the year the Gulf lost its innocence.'

There was some discussion of the role of GCC troops in Bahrain. It was said Bahrain had provided an opportunity for a show of force by the GCC, independently of the US. A participant said that sending GCC police to man checkpoints around Shia villages had hardly created a positive vision of the GCC governments' push for greater unity, although he did not blame the people of the neighbouring states for this; 'they are just like us [Bahrainis]'. Another participant argued that Saudi Arabia was unfairly blamed for its neighbours' problems, as if the other Gulf rulers would prefer to be democratic if it were not for the Al Saud.

Saudi Arabia's own parliament, the Majlis Al-Shura, was toothless, a participant said, adding that appointments to the majlis were used as a reward for loyalists or as a 'promotion' when a minister wanted to rid himself of someone senior within his ministry. Yet an opinion poll in 2011 found that 69% of Saudis surveyed said they trusted the majlis. The same poll suggested Saudis were very divided over the relationship between democracy and religion. The assessment of this participant was that 'Saudis want some kind of freedom in politics under sharia law, and they are not sure about the meaning of democracy.'

SESSION 3: FUTURE PROSPECTS

A number of participants felt that the ruling elites in the Gulf are underestimating the need for reform, and overestimating the extent to which reforms are a threat. Although some monarchies had taken a few positive steps, the events of the Arab Spring halted any progress and led to significant backward steps, particularly in Bahrain but also in the UAE, where press freedom and the space for civil-society activities had been reduced.

However, participants acknowledged that it was not all bad news. They were interested in the steps being taken by the kings of Jordan and Morocco to accommodate demands for political reform. Notably, King Mohammed of Morocco had announced that the head of the government would be selected from the party that won elections, while King Abdullah of Jordan had announced a date within three years for the country to have a directly elected prime minister. In addition, although rarely mentioned, Oman had taken a number of quiet steps towards political reform. In a step unparalleled in the Gulf, Sultan Qaboos had decided to include an elected official on the committee that decides on the royal succession.³ He had also replaced 15 members of his government, including three who were considered to be very close allies.

Participants mentioned the welfare state in the Gulf states as an obstacle to democracy. As long as citizens were provided with everything they need in terms of healthcare, education and housing, they would be less likely to busy themselves with democracy, it was argued. Yet Kuwait, with its well-developed political culture, was said to provide a counter-example to this view. Several participants stated that despite the frustrating aspects of Kuwaiti politics, Kuwaiti citizens are incredibly proud of their freedom of speech and debate. A participant expressed concern that there was a rising tide of 'anti-liberal sentiment' in the Gulf, with people using religion to justify restrictions on freedom of speech, including on social media.

³ Royal Decree 99/2011 amended the composition of the Defence Council to include the presidents of the Majlis Al-Shura (elected chamber of parliament), Majlis Al-Dawla (appointed chamber) and Supreme Court, as well as military commanders.

Some participants questioned whether a 'black swan' event – such as a major shock from the global economy – would be needed before real political change came to the Gulf. It was suggested there could be major economic problems to come in Saudi Arabia, where the current expansionary fiscal policy is unsustainable; in the UAE, where state capitalism made some spectacular errors in Dubai; or in Kuwait, where some state companies were thought to be in significant difficulties. Would a Gulf country one day find itself unable to pay public-sector wages? 'When the economic crisis comes, people will use religion more,' said a participant, 'and some will say it's our punishment for the sin of opulence'.

Others argued there were prospects for gradual change resulting from the evolving mindset of citizens, not least through rising levels of education. In this view, democratic values were gradually spreading and would help make rentier bargains less effective. It was said that elected institutions and other consultation mechanisms needed to be adapted to take account of changes in Gulf society, where the majority of the population is under the age of thirty. Traditional means of representation and consultation, through tribes, religious leaders and, more recently, parliaments are failing to represent important constituencies in society, such as the youth, women, naturalized citizens and expatriate workers. Governments and societies needed to find ways for these groups to have peaceful, accepted means to voice their concerns.

Bahrain was cited as an example of a post-rentier state that had failed to implement reforms in good time. It was suggested that governments should press ahead with reforms while their fiscal and broader economic positions are still strong, as this would help to create a conducive environment for consensus-building and cooperation between government and elected institutions. A participant said that high oil prices could give governments the resources to build new institutions and implement reforms with some control over the process, rather than waiting for the youth to set the agenda at a tougher time. States should learn from the experience of other Arab countries that pre-emptive, early reforms can be to states' long-term advantage.

FUTURE TRENDS IN THE GCC

The Kuwait Study Groups formed part of the MENA Programme's ongoing project looking at 'Future Trends in the GCC'. The project aims to research, analyse and anticipate future scenarios for the political and economic development of the GCC states. The research has two main tracks: **political and economic development**, looking at the prospects for the GCC countries to adapt and develop their systems to meet the aspirations of their citizens; and **identity politics**, assessing the politics of sectarianism and prospects for developing more inclusive national identities. These themes will be explored in the context of relevant changes in the wider Middle East region.

www.chathamhouse.org/research/middle-east/current-projects/bahrain-and-gulf

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