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## Policy Brief #9

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# U.S. Challenges and Choices in the Gulf: Political Liberalization

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Parliamentary elections in Bahrain raised questions about the prospects for political reform and greater openness in Gulf state monarchies. While most of the reforms evident in Gulf states have been top-down and rather limited in effect, they seem to reflect popular demands for greater participation and greater accountability. Demography, economic problems, and public demonstrations are all driving political reform efforts in Gulf states. However, the movement toward political liberalization evident in almost every Gulf country is offset by the risks of instability brought about by these very reforms. Consequently, progress is likely to be slow and accompanied by backsliding. Carefully formulated U.S. policy can support nascent political liberalization movements while taking steps to reduce the risks such reform poses to U.S. interests in the Gulf.

### I. The Parliamentary Elections in Bahrain: A Useful Case Study

Some observers have labeled Bahrain the democratic hope of the Arab world in the wake of its October 2002 parliamentary elections. But Bahrain is in many ways unique – its progress toward liberalization is being spurred by economic stagnation, societal fragmentation and a history of political unrest – suggesting that its experiment with democracy will not be easily replicated by other Gulf states.

First, Bahrain is the poorest of the Gulf monarchies. Having already expended most of its oil reserves, it is struggling to diversify its economy. It suffers from high unemployment and relies on subsidies from other, richer Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. Second, Bahrain's demography is unique in the Gulf. Its population is 70% Shi'a, though it is ruled by a Sunni royal family. Disenfranchisement and discrimination against Shi'a Bahrainis is a longtime source of tension in the country. Finally, Bahrain has a history of political unrest that has occasionally erupted into violence and led to government repression. An early post-independence experiment with an elected parliament from 1973 to 1975 led to continuing subsequent demands for a return to electoral politics.

Instability has led the royal family to seek a *modus vivendi*. Bahrain's reforms were a response to intense popular pressure, including a domestic "uprising" that lasted through most of the 1990s. The ascension to power of a reform-minded king in 1999 led to amnesty for political prisoners, the abolition of state

security courts, and the lifting of prohibitions on free assembly. The new monarch's political reforms included a National Charter that received 98% approval in a February 2001 referendum.

But the reform process in Bahrain has not been unblemished. The king decreed that the new legislature be bicameral, with an appointed upper house that holds power equal to that of the elected lower house. As a result, the main opposition groups (mostly Shi'a) decided to boycott the October 2002 elections. The opposition and the monarchy struggled mightily (but peacefully) to convince voters to avoid or to attend the polls. Despite these tensions, however, the elections were fair and open and achieved a turnout of about 50%.

With the new parliament dominated by a diverse set of Islamists (most of whom have no concrete political platform), and with the main opposition groups excluded from the parliamentary process (albeit of their own volition), the future of Bahrain's reform experiment is precarious. The king retains a great deal of authority and must determine whether and how to institutionalize the democratic reforms he has initiated. He must also account for anti-reform sentiments within his own family, which fears the loss of its longstanding social and economic privileges. Finally, he must determine how to integrate the large and mobilized Shi'a opposition into the political system.

## **II. Is Bahrain a Model for the Gulf?**

### ***Saudi Arabia***

Bahrain's experience is in part an attempt to resolve economic problems and social unrest through increased political participation. However, for Saudi Arabia, another Gulf state facing demographic and economic challenges, a move toward greater openness is unlikely. Bahrain's small size and Shi'a-Sunni mix create unique pressures for democracy, whereas Saudi Arabia's large and increasingly youthful population is somewhat restive, but more homogenous. This makes political liberalization in Saudi Arabia both more risky and less urgent than in Bahrain. Moreover, the absolute rule of the Saudi royal family rests on religious grounds. Their interpretation of the Koran rejects the notion of man-made law, and the only provision for popular participation in governance is through *shura*, a consultative mechanism whereby wise and well-informed men are meant to advise the king and transmit to him the views of the populace. Saudi Arabia has a Consultative Council that includes a diverse group of elites and is often innovative, but does not have much direct responsibility for governance. There appears to be little room for real liberalization of the political process within the confines of the Saudi system.

### ***Qatar, Kuwait and Oman***

For other Gulf states, and in contrast to Saudi Arabia, liberalization is already underway, suggesting that the Bahraini experiment may have greater impact.

- Qatar has been experimenting with its own, top-down, reform process, beginning with municipal elections and the drafting of a constitution. The Qatari emir wishes to leapfrog over Bahrain on the path to democratization; Qatar's tiny population and relative wealth might make its path toward reform relatively smooth.
- Kuwait has had its own struggles since the reestablishment of its parliament in 1992. The Kuwaiti parliament is active, vocal, and significantly more conservative than the royal family; it often stymies royal initiatives, especially those promoting women's suffrage (currently only literate male citizens can vote).

- Oman's slow liberalization process has been tightly controlled by the sultan. It has a bicameral parliament with an elected lower house, but suffrage is limited, political parties are outlawed, and the sultan can invalidate election results.

It should be noted that all of these states have small populations and relatively high per-capita incomes, which reduce the risks of reform and make it prospectively more manageable.

### ***Yemen: Progress Worth Noting***

Analysts highlight the reform experience of another Arab state, Yemen, as a model of reform for countries that are not traditional monarchies. With assistance from international organizations and non-governmental organizations, Yemen has managed to unify its two previously warring halves into a single republic, in part by establishing democratic governing institutions that hold them together. While parts of Yemen are almost ungovernable, the government is working to expand its authority and to instill democratic practices at the local level. Because of the political institutions the Yemeni government has built, it is hard to see how its democratization could be reversed. The Yemeni experience contrasts with the reform efforts of the Gulf monarchies, which are fragile and could easily be abandoned.

### **III. Impact of a War in Iraq on Gulf Liberalization**

Democratization in Iraq, or significant liberalization in Iran, might well accelerate demands for political participation in the smaller Gulf states. Moreover, any regime change in Iraq is likely to increase the political power of the Iraqi Shi'a, who, despite constituting a majority of the population, are underrepresented in the ranks of government compared to the country's Sunni minority. This conceivable progression of events could reinvigorate political activism among the Arab Shi'a populations in Bahrain and perhaps in Saudi Arabia. As an ultimate consequence of increased Shi'a activism in the Gulf, some U.S. analysts fear that the Bahraini monarchy (to say nothing of other governments in the region) might abandon democratization in order to maintain its political dominance.

### **IV. Fostering Liberalization while Preventing Extremist Rule**

Historically, the lack of political openness in Gulf societies has made mosques the only arena for public political activity. The result is that the opposition groups that have emerged are almost exclusively Islamist and often anti-Western. Such groups continue to thrive. The United States has a strong interest in liberalization because it might well create the political space necessary for the emergence of moderate opposition groups in the Gulf. However, this important interest competes with the *defining* U.S. interest in the Gulf -- stability. This is because democracies in the Gulf might be more anti-U.S. than the current regimes, at least in the short-term. Concern over the possibly destabilizing outcome of liberalization has sometimes restrained U.S. support for it. Analysts suggest that in tackling this dilemma the United States might consider:

- Providing moral encouragement and a positive example for moderate opposition parties, especially those organizing themselves in venues other than mosques;
- Fostering liberal values along with demands for democratic processes, so that liberalization does not lead to uniformly anti-U.S. attitudes in Arab polities;
- Working to help improve economic and social conditions in poorer Gulf states so that liberalization does not lead to instability;
- Publicly recognizing reformist leaders while not undermining their domestic legitimacy; and

- Encouraging the growth of political movements and social institutions that will participate in and support stable democratic systems.

Given that many Gulf states only achieved independence in the 1970s, and have only enjoyed one or two generations of formal education, swift progress toward mature and stable democracies may be too much to expect. But there is undeniable movement toward greater political participation in almost every Gulf state. However imperfect or halting, change is in the air.

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