

Youth Activism in the Small Gulf States

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Brief Analysis

Young activists will likely be important agents of structural reform in the small Gulf states, and Washington should make more effort to engage them.

Youths have been key drivers of revolutions across the Middle East since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in early 2011. For example, one recent study indicates that more than half of the protestors in the Egyptian revolution were between the ages of 18 and 30. Although young activists have not sparked similarly dramatic change in the small states along the Persian Gulf's western littoral -- Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman -- they will likely play an important role in structural reform and therefore merit more attention from both Washington and their own governments.

YOUTHS PUSHING THE TEMPO

Increasingly muscular youth movements carry important implications regarding the extent of potential change in the Gulf, as already seen in fits and starts in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman. Like their counterparts in other Arab states, young Gulf activists tend to pursue political agendas that are more far-reaching than those of traditional opposition elements and older generations. Yet they generally call for legislative, judicial, and other structural reforms rather than all-out revolution.

One notable exception is in Bahrain, where the loosely organized February 14 Youth Coalition is demanding an end to the al-Khalifa monarchy and Washington's close partnership with it, unlike the island's well-established opposition groups. While the chances of achieving that goal are small, the movement's prominence raises the bar in terms what kind of political concessions will be required of the palace.

Likewise in Kuwait, youth coalitions and longstanding opposition elements disagree over the anticipated pace and extent of reform -- the youths desire more rapid change and have pushed harder for a full parliamentary system. In Oman, older generations have chastised young protestors for continuing to demand political and economic change following a host of concessions by the country's ruler, Sultan Qaboos.

Demographic and economic factors could further widen the call for structural reform in these countries, particularly the "youth bulge" (i.e., the large working-age population) and high unemployment rates. Approximately one-third of the citizenry in Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar, and one-quarter in Kuwait and the UAE, are between the ages of 15 and 29. Unemployment among 15-to-24-year-olds hovers between 17 and 24 percent in most of these countries (except the UAE, where the rate is slightly lower). Sustained joblessness on that scale could turn up the heat politically by contributing to the loss of dignity so often cited as a key factor in other Arab uprisings. Although Gulf rulers will no doubt dole out national largesse to muffle discontent, many youths will continue to search for dignified work and independent income, with time on their hands to press for it via activism.

KUWAIT AND BAHRAIN

The most widespread calls for political restructuring in the small Gulf states have been heard in Kuwait and Bahrain, where youth groups have emerged as important actors in the opposition. Late last year, young men and women in Kuwait organized mass demonstrations against a new electoral districting system believed to favor pro-government factions in the parliament. And in Bahrain, the February 14 coalition's tireless organization of protests over the past two years seems to have influenced both Manama and Riyadh's calculations about the need to implement concessions before the unrest intensifies.

The relative strength of the Kuwaiti and Bahraini youth movements derives in part from their experience and organization. In Kuwait, youth groups have built on their successes over the past few years, with activists playing a role in the landmark 2006 electoral law and the 2011 resignation of former prime minister Sheikh Nasser Muhammad al-Sabah due to corruption allegations. Youth leaders have also collaborated with long-serving opposition parliamentarians, further boosting their potential to influence the government.

In Bahrain, February 14 leaders have been linked to well-established opposition figures currently in jail, including several from the Shiite opposition party al-Haq. Some believe that the youth coalition is also receiving funds from wealthy Shiites throughout the Gulf. Indeed, its success in mobilizing and sustaining support on the ground has been impressive, so its leaders may well be benefitting from organizational, tactical, and financial assistance offered by longstanding opposition elements and prominent Gulf Shiites.

Kuwait and Bahrain's youth activists have also proven flexible, shifting in response to current events and specific political goals rather than hewing to general ideological lines like traditional opposition groups. In February 2012, several Kuwaiti youth groups merged to form the Civil Democratic Movement in order to maximize their influence in pressing for a full parliamentary system. Similarly, Bahrain's youth coalition is an umbrella for various neighborhood street demonstrators and cyber activists, many of whom planned the February 14, 2011, "Day of Rage" that first sparked the island's protest movement.

In the absence of change on the ground, the strength and influence of youth campaigns in these countries will likely continue their upward trajectory. In Kuwait, widening fractures in the traditional opposition could give youth movements another opening to assert leadership. And in Bahrain, the more revolutionary youth groups will likely grow stronger if the sluggish National Dialogue process continues to entangle al-Wefaq and other large, well-established Shiite opposition parties indefinitely -- assuming young protestors can abstain from violence. In contrast, an agreement on genuine political restructuring between the government and mainstream opposition would probably weaken the more extreme youth groups.

THE UAE, OMAN, AND QATAR

Youth activism in these states is more limited, partly due to the lack of experience, organization, and political culture needed to support such movements. Even during the height of excitement surrounding the initial Arab uprisings in early 2011, Facebook and Twitter calls for youth demonstrations in the UAE fell flat, as did two Facebook

efforts to spur protests in Qatar. Similarly, the young Omanis who organized protests across the country that year proved unable to sustain support in the long run.

Today, some reform-minded youths in the UAE and Oman are attaching themselves to the subtle campaigns of civil society activists and other professionals while propagating their ideas individually online. In the Emirates, authorities have rounded up students and other young people along with members of the well-rooted local Muslim Brotherhood group al-Islah, established human rights activists, and their support networks (e.g., their lawyers). In Oman, youths have joined sit-ins to protest the detention of activists. There especially, a better-organized youth movement could tap into discontent among the labor force to amplify a reform campaign.

Qatari youths have been the quietest among their Gulf counterparts -- in two recent polls, an average of 83 percent of them stated that their country has been "going in the right direction," the highest figure among a dozen Arab countries surveyed. The limited pushes for political change thus far have been made by established professionals such as economics professor Ali Khalifa al-Kuwari, who convenes "Monday Meetings" to discuss reform and development in Qatar. This kind of activity could provide an opening for youths to expand their own political activity, including those who created and "liked" the various "Qatar revolution" Facebook pages.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Over the past few months, Gulf rulers have calculated once again that young people expressing various forms of dissent are a political liability that demands a security response, with recent crackdowns in Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, and Oman targeting youths on Twitter and other internet forums. As the stability of the small Gulf states depends on their rulers' dexterity in responding to popular pressures before they bottleneck and explode, Washington should encourage local authorities to directly engage youth leaders in a serious manner. And although the Egyptian experience has taught that today's revolutionaries might not be tomorrow's political leaders, U.S. engagement with amenable youth activists would build important ties with change-makers and help gauge the direction reform might take.

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