

Arab Gulf Politics and Powell's Visit

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Brief Analysis

As Secretary of State Colin Powell and former President George Bush celebrate the tenth anniversary of the liberation of Kuwait, for many Gulf Arabs the occasion marks a decade since Saddam Husayn's tanks put the lie to the promises of security that local leaders had made to their people. After popular trust in these Gulf leaders was tarnished by their need to rely on U.S. and allied forces to expel the Iraqis (despite the billions of dollars of oil wealth these rulers had spent on high-tech weaponry over the years), Gulf monarchs started to concede to their peoples a greater say in political life.

The result of this development has been a slow but steady process of openness and reform even in the most closed of these tribal-focused societies. Since the Gulf War, the Kuwaiti National Assembly has become more active, Saudi Arabia and Oman have established consultative councils (Oman's being elected, Saudi Arabia's appointed), Qatar has held municipal elections, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has boosted the authority of its Federal National Council, and Bahrain has announced elections to replace a national assembly dissolved in 1975. Washington is unlikely to emphasize the "D word" (as democracy is often referred to in the Gulf) as long as the threat from Saddam remains. But political reform may be the key to enabling local elites to address the most serious long-term security challenges confronting these regimes namely, the deepening social and economic problems that are occurring as burgeoning populations and popular expectations of an easy life press hard against oil revenues (only temporarily swollen by the high prices over the last two years).

The Pace of Change Throughout the Gulf monarchies, there appears to be dissonance between whether political change will reduce problems or merely exacerbate them. The main divide in approach appears to be based on generational differences, with new rulers who have succeeded their fathers since the Gulf War, as in Bahrain and Qatar, being more adventurous. The older leaderships, for example in Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi (the leading sheikhdom in the UAE), remain far more skeptical.

Kuwait has been hampered in developing a firm response by an increasingly aged and ailing leadership of the ruling al-Sabah family. The emir, Sheikh Jaber, is said to be uninterested in government. His cousin and heir apparent, Sheikh Saad, is prime minister but is in uncertain health and recently spent months in the United States and Britain having medical check-ups and convalescing. Both men are thought to be more than seventy years old. Day-to-day

government duties have been taken up by the apparent next-in-line, Sheikh Sabah, who was the foreign minister. He is frequently at odds with his cousin Sheikh Salem, who was defense minister until recently.

In January, Sheikh Sabah resigned in apparent frustration after months of criticism by the National Assembly about alleged corruption and nationalist opposition to an invitation to foreign oil companies to drill in the area adjacent to Iraq. The rest of the cabinet immediately handed in their resignations. In the new cabinet named last week, Sheikh Sabah was appointed deputy prime minister as well as foreign minister, with ailing Sheikh Saad still nominally in control with the title of prime minister. Sheikh Sabah's rival Sheikh Salem lost his post as defense minister.

Surprisingly, another casualty was Sheikh Saud Nasser, the oil minister who was the ambassador in Washington during the Iraqi occupation of his country. The appointment to the cabinet of four elected members of the National Assembly may help to reduce some of the tension with the Kuwaiti electorate, but the al-Sabah family still has almost half the portfolios. Among the new al-Sabah entrants dubbed as a new generation despite being middle-aged is Sheikh Mohammed, until now the ambassador to the United States, who has become minister of state for foreign affairs and therefore effectively controls the foreign ministry.

Meanwhile, in Bahrain the home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet the accelerating political transformation could rapidly overtake developments in Kuwait. However, the changes bring risks. The Gulf monarchies are all Sunni-ruled, including in the island-state of Bahrain where the Shia Muslim community is a majority. Some Iranians, both before and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, have considered Bahrain as part of Shia Muslim Iran. As recently as 1996, Tehran was accused of backing a coup plot. The Bahraini emir, Sheikh Hamad, who took over after the sudden death of his father in 1999, has freed political dissidents, suspended the special security courts, and abandoned the practice of often arbitrary arrest and detention without trial. He must have been pleased by last week's overwhelming 98 percent "yes" vote in a referendum for his reforms. Still, it is unclear whether most Bahrainis share the ruler's agenda, which seems to put a high priority on him being proclaimed king (in his eyes, a step up in prestige from his current title of emir). The pace of reform is none too rapid: the constitution calls for a parliament, but none of its members will be elected until 2003.

Human Rights ConcernsOne impediment to increased democracy in Gulf states is probably the concomitant requirement for basic human rights. Even where there are national assemblies, suffrage is often limited: women do not have the vote in Kuwait (they do in Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar) and male suffrage often has property requirements. Freedom of the press and of religion is limited, often severely. Breaking the law risks confronting judicial systems where access to lawyers is far from automatic.

Sometimes rulers seem to fear that a fair legal system will undermine their authority. That applies even to cases involving foreigners. A Briton recently confessed on Saudi television to blowing up another expatriate, but British diplomats who later visited him were warned that access would stop if they asked him about the circumstances of his confession. The Briton, as well as a Belgian and a Canadian who made similar confessions, could literally lose his head. The case, in which three Americans have reportedly also been detained, links illegal sale of alcohol in the strictly Islamic country to three explosions in which expatriates have been killed or injured. Perhaps the affair was a dispute among foreigners as the Saudi authorities maintain, but it is also possible that Saudi officials do not want to acknowledge they might have a political problem with Saudi Islamist opposition groups.

Challenges for Powell Mindful of Arab criticism of the Clinton administration for its alleged bias in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the new U.S. administration will probably judge that now is not the right time to bring up issues of democracy and human rights, especially while it is trying to draft a more successful policy on Iraq. But during the next four years, it is entirely likely there will be new rulers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE indeed, given the age of some heirs apparent, perhaps more than one leadership change in each country. A component for U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf should be an encouragement of greater democracy so that new rulers can win

legitimacy by out-maneuvering radical opposition groups. And the Gulf rulers will listen only to direct and time-consuming contact with principals like Powell (rather than lower-level officials) if they are going to be persuaded to quicken the pace of political reform.

Meanwhile, both the United States and the Gulf monarchies have to be aware that Iraq will exploit the political differences that will inevitably be voiced as the monarchies open up political life. A constant theme of Iraqi propaganda is personal criticism of the Gulf leaders who it refers to as "dwarves," a comment about their dependence on the United States and Britain which is particularly insulting because several of them are sensitive about their small physical stature. The Iraqi threat is real as Saddam Husayn's eldest son, Uday, reminded the world when he demanded recently that the map on the emblem of the Iraqi Parliament be revised to include Kuwait as part of Iraq but that should be a spur, not a deterrent, to political reform.

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