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The difficult development of parliamentary politics in the Gulf: Parliaments and the process of managed reform in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman

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The Difficult Development of Parliamentary Politics in the Gulf: Parliaments and the Process of Managed Reform in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman

Research Paper, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States

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Abstract

Parliaments have a poor record in the Middle East, often providing a vehicle to enhance the ruling authorities' control rather than democratic representation. However, since 2011 the demands for political voice in post-revolutionary states have tended to focus on the creation of mass political parties and an effective, and democratic, parliament. This paper examines the development of the parliamentary institutions in three Gulf states: Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. In each of these countries these institutions have, to some extent, been a forum for the articulation of demands for more political and constitutional power, but have often been prevented from addressing sensitive political issues, and their powers and membership have been manipulated to the benefit of the government. The paper examines how these dynamics have played themselves out in each of the three Gulf states, and reflects on the role that parliamentary institutions might play in the coming years in both managing those states' political tensions and providing a catalyst for more far-reaching political reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

The speed of change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since the beginning of 2011 has made analysis of political institutions within the region difficult and prediction even harder. 'Arab Spring' is being used as an all-encompassing term, but masks huge variety within the region in terms of the speed and size of the initial protest movements, and countries' adaption to post-uprising politics. The contrasting trajectories of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria emphasizes just some of that variety. Within the Gulf, most media attention has focused on Bahrain, where protests were met with forceful suppression by the ruling family, and where few are offering an optimistic assessment of the prospects for change. Yet there have been protests in many countries with rulers in all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states nervous enough about regional trends to co-ordinate their responses to the pressures for change.

The demands for reform are a reflection of long-standing tensions and deeper trends within such societies. The way in which they have emerged – and been dealt with subsequently – highlight characteristics in a process of 'managed reform' within the region. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of those developments and dynamics , focusing principally on the role of the parliamentary institution in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman.[1] Parliaments are the most prominent institutions of representative democracy – with 190 of 193 countries around the world having some sort of representative body (UNDP/IPU 2012: 10) – and the fight for democracy in the Arab region has highlighted the centrality of such institutions. The demands for political representation in post-revolutionary states have focused on the creation of mass political parties and an effective, and democratic, parliament.

The role of the parliaments in that process, and the extent to which they provide a forum for articulation of public demands for change, are less clear. The three countries studied here have perhaps the most active parliaments in the Gulf, but each highlights the distinctiveness of the processes of political change. In each country, the parliament has been both a symbol of, and a forum for, the pressure for democratic reform. At one end, Kuwait's parliament is the loudest and liveliest in the region, having sat since 1963 (albeit with unconstitutional dissolutions in 1976 and 1986), and in recent years has increasingly challenged the emir and the government. In Bahrain, a short-lived parliament existed for around two years in the mid-1970s, and was resuscitated by the new king in 2002 partly as a means to ease sectarian tension. However, the fact that the new parliament turned out to be a pale imitation of its predecessor has been a source of continuing grievance around which much recent political turmoil has revolved. By contrast, the evolution of Oman's parliament has been slow, even by the standards of the Gulf. The country, which was the latest in the GCC to adopt a constitution (in 1996), held its first popular elections in 2003, but to a body which lacked legislative authority, and whose influence was confined almost entirely to economic development. Yet the response of the sultan to popular unrest in Oman has led to that body's being granted nominally important legislative powers; only time will tell what impact they will have.

Three themes underpin the analysis of the states' political trajectory and dynamics of change. First, recent events have reinforced the extent to which the process of reform is controlled and directed by the ruling autocracy. Daniel Brumberg has characterized the states

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[1] The terms 'parliament' or 'parliamentary institution' are used as generic terms throughout to cover the range of national representative, legislative and consultative bodies that exist within the region. A distinction is made between the Majlis A'Shura and Majlis Al-Nuwab/Al-Umma later in the paper.

as 'liberalising autocracies' distinguished by 'guided pluralism, controlled elections and selective repression' (Brumberg 2002: 56). Liberalizing autocracies are thus 'liberal in the sense that their leaders not only tolerate but promote a measure of political openness … but they are autocratic in that their rulers always retain the upper hand … with their ultimate reliance on the supreme authority of the monarch or president, liberalized autocracies provide a kind of virtual democracy' (Brumberg 2003: 3)

Recent political unrest has highlighted the challenges and difficulties in this process of 'managed reform', not least the 'King's Dilemma' (Huntington 1968: 177–91), that is, how ruling monarchs foster a process of political reform without endangering their own power, when reforms initiated from the top tend to increase demands for more radical change from the bottom. The dilemma they are grappling with 'is how to balance undertaking reform that increases their own legitimacy against allowing the pendulum of power to swing … which could ultimately see a tangible challenge to their position' (Ehteshami and Wright 2007: 916). In each of the three states, parliaments have been part of that process of managed reform: the institution providing the possibility of meaningful reform and an arena for the articulation of public concern, but also a forum within which political demands can be actively managed and manipulated by rulers.

Second, the relationship between voters and rulers – and thus the role of the parliaments – is conditioned by the nature of the rentier state in the Gulf. The quadrupling of oil prices during the 1970s changed the dynamic in these countries, bringing huge wealth, but meaning that the economy is ultimately dependent on the expenditure of the state, as the principal recipient of oil rents. This has several implications for politics. In the first place, it weakens demands for political representation – where the state does not need to rely on the income of citizens or the private sector for its tax revenues, it will feel less of an obligation to give them influence over policy or spending decisions. In short, 'no taxation, no representation'. In addition, the middle classes, who would be expected to articulate these demands most forcefully, were effectively bought off in most of the Gulf countries. The merchant classes traded political power for economic wealth, or as John Waterbury puts it, 'the tacit understanding has been that the bourgeoisie would renounce any overt political role and that it would follow the broad economic directives of the state, in exchange for which it would be allowed to make significant profits' (Waterbury 1994: 27). This context inevitably means that the sources of authority and legitimacy for elected representatives are different, which in turn is partly responsible for constraining the political role of parliamentary institutions within such states.

Third, the political dynamics in the Gulf are changing, partly due to the events of 2011. But those events were themselves a reflection of deeper societal, demographic and economic pressures. The response to unrest in Oman and Kuwait by their rulers was to buy off some dissent, through either handouts, the creation of new jobs or various state-provided benefits. Yet the rulers themselves recognize that the rentier model is not a viable long-term strategy – as oil production declines, the state will not always be able to furnish its citizens with the same level of benefits. This in turn will undermine the social compact on which the current political settlement between the state, the private sector and its citizens is built.

The decline of natural resources is exacerbated by the Gulf's rapid population growth, meaning that the burden on the state to provide education, welfare and employment is steadily expanding. The *Arab Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2009 suggested that the Arab region as a whole needed to create around 50 million new jobs by 2020 to absorb its young population into the workforce. The high expectations of a rising young population create the conditions for political pressure, which the states need to anticipate. As Jill Crystal has pointed out, economic liberalization is being driven by 'governments' fear that growing youth unemployment will metastasise into political dissent if jobs are not found, and by the hope that the private sector can postpone that day' (Crystal 2009: 43)

In any state, the parliament should be the principal vehicle for political representation, capable of speaking truth to power. In Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman the parliaments have all, to some extent, been a forum for the articulation of demands for more political and constitutional power. But the institutions suffer from a lack of public trust, and their role has been compromised by what is perceived as complicity with the ruling authorities. The parliaments have often been prevented from addressing some of the most sensitive political issues, and their powers and membership have been manipulated to the benefit of the government. They have thus been central to the strategy of managed reform, and the ruling authorities have sought to prevent them becoming effective or central to political life. But the behaviour of MPs has also often reinforced the sense that they are marginal to the political process. This paper examines how these dynamics have played themselves out in each of these three Gulf states, and reflects on the role that they might play in the coming years in both managing those states' political tensions and providing a catalyst for more far-reaching political reform.

2. KUWAIT

Kuwait's parliament, the Majlis Al-Umma, created after independence in 1963, is the longest-standing and the most vociferous in the region. Over the last fifty years, it has been the scene of successive challenges to the king's powers and the push to extend the rights of the elected assembly. And, although it is arguably more significant than any other parliament in the Gulf, it has also been subject to the divide-and-rule tactics of the rulers, which have at times limited both its impact and its relevance, and frequently resulted in constitutional stalemate.

The parliament's powers reflect a wider constitutional desire for checks and balances. In the first place, although fifty representatives are directly elected, the emir can appoint an additional fifteen members who sit in parliament as ministers, giving the government an immediate fifteen-person advantage. Parliament has significant powers, but they are essentially negative ones: it has the power to block, but little power to create. For example, the emir nominates ministers to cabinet, but parliament has the power to remove ministers (including the prime minister) and delay government legislation. It cannot appoint ministers or initiate laws. If parliament wins a vote of no confidence in the prime minister, the emir then either has to appoint an alternative whom parliament can work with or dissolve parliament and hold fresh elections. The distribution of power between the emir and the parliament in the constitution effectively means that each side can cancel the other out.

It is in this context that the ruling Al-Sabah family's style of 'managed reform' needs to be understood. Since 1963 the political system has been characterized by exactly these sorts of tussles, with the advantage see-sawing between the two, as parliament and the ruling family have both sought to establish the boundaries of the other side's power. On two occasions, in 1976 and 1986, these tensions reached the point where the ruling Al-Sabah family suspended the constitution and dissolved parliament. That shifting of power has been especially contested since 2006, as the parliament's push for greater influence and the government's resistance meant four elections in six years. Unsurprisingly, voter disillusion was already high by the time of the protests across the Middle East in 2011. Yet the storming of parliament by protestors in November 2011 had less to do with issues seizing the region than with public and media outrage at a very local issue of alleged corruption, and the buying of MPs' votes by the government. Whether the parliament can win itself significant new powers, and break out of the cycle of conflict, dissolution and government manipulation, is likely to rest less on events elsewhere than on how the parliament itself handles the recent corruption scandals, and whether it can convince the Kuwaiti public that it is central to political life.

2.1. Managed reform as 'divide and rule'

The Al-Sabah family has run Kuwaiti politics since the eighteenth century, principally because it was at the head of an alliance with the trading merchants who dominated the economy before the discovery of oil. The shift to the rentier state also restructured political life. During the 1950s and 1960s the merchant families effectively gave up their right to influence policy in return for substantial government disbursements, and a tacit promise that the Al-Sabah would not interfere in business (Crystal 1989: 431). This then left the ruling family to adopt a strategy of divide and rule for the second half of the twentieth century. At various points, in order to dilute what they regarded as potential opposition in parliament the Al-Sabah quietly encouraged other groups, including Sunni Islamists, Bedouin and Shia groups to organize and become politically active. In addition, the family sought to buy the support of certain politicians, generally known as 'service deputies', whose support for government policy is given in return for the state funding for their constituencies. And, when that was not enough the electorate was expanded to include new groups of voters, such as newly urbanized Bedouin (Brown 2009).

This fracturing of the political system is reinforced by the absence of political parties. As in other Gulf states, political parties are banned by law and thus candidates cannot campaign on a party slate during elections. This does not stop blocs of like-minded candidates cooperating, and they have done so since the 1960s. But once elected, parliamentary groups form around fairly obvious political divisions, forming de facto political parties, which since 1992 have broadly formed into four groups: a Sunni Islamist bloc, a Shia Islamist bloc, secular liberals, and 'independents' who generally support the government. However, the ban on parties means that voters elect individuals, giving an impetus to independent, local and tribal candidates, and these blocs tend to lack the level of party discipline and cohesion that characterizes parties in longer-standing political systems.

While the Al-Sabah's style of 'managed reform' succeeded in fragmenting the opposition for long periods, it also increased the number of opposition groups represented in parliament, and could not prevent the growth in their support. Significantly, the Islamist groups gained representation for the first time in 1992, and have featured prominently ever since. Overall, opposition groups polled strongly in elections in 1992 and 1996, and formed the majority of MPs in the parliaments elected in 1999 and 2003. Yet their effectiveness as an opposition to government has been sporadic. They have tested government ministers and blocked government measures, but the level of fragmentation within the parliament means that

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they have rarely worked in a concerted fashion. Opposition seems to rely on guerrilla raids on government measures, rather than presenting a coherent alternative to government policy.

2.2. From crisis to uneasy settlement: 2006–11

The Al-Sabah's strategy for managing the parliament thus seemed to be working, albeit in an ad hoc fashion, up to 2006: by picking off individual politicians, on an issue-by-issue basis, it was relatively successful in diverting a sustained challenge to its power. However, that very policy appeared to have sown the seeds of the instability and the threat of a further constitutional crisis between 2006 and 2009.

The year 2006 appeared to mark a distinct shift in the relationship between parliament and government. Three events worked to galvanize the opposition into more unified political blocs. First, the death of Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad Al-Sabah prompted a crisis of succession, and emphasized the constitutional role of parliament in deposing a ruling emir deemed medically unfit to rule. Second, government proposals to change electoral law were perceived by the majority of MPs as an attempt to gerrymander constituencies and increase the likelihood of vote-buying. Third, parliament's attempt to call the prime minister for questioning was resisted and led to the emir's dissolving parliament and calling new elections for June 2006. In the resulting vote, the opposition won convincingly, taking more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament, around half of them won by Islamists.

The immediate effect was the government's acceptance of the new electoral law, but it marked the start of three years of political instability in Kuwait. In the spring of 2007 two members of the ruling family resigned following parliamentary interpellations, and in 2008 the differences between government and opposition became insurmountable as the parliament attempted to implement pay rises for state employees. The emir again dissolved parliament and elections were held in May 2008, where the opposition groups increased their representation to thirty-six seats in the fifty-member assembly. Tensions rose once more at the end of 2008 when the parliament again attempted to interpellate the prime minister, and they continued to increase until March 2009, when the cabinet resigned and the emir again dissolved parliament.

The subsequent elections in May 2009 were notable for three things: the relatively low turnout, at 55 per cent; the election of four women MPs for the first time; and a significant increase in government-supporting MPs, mainly at the expense of the Sunni Islamists. However, the political stalemate seemed set to continue. By the end of 2009, when parliament again attempted to interpellate the prime minister and three other ministers, there was

widespread fear that the emir would resort to the unconstitutional dissolution of parliament, as had occurred in 1976 and 1986.

In the event, what had been seen as another potential fracture in Kuwaiti political history was resolved in a relatively low-key fashion. All four ministers were not only questioned in parliament, but won votes of confidence. Superficially, at least, the period of instability appeared to have dissipated, with parliament and government coming to an uneasy settlement. Parliament had won the significant (and long-sought) constitutional right to question the prime minister, while the subsequent votes of approval for the ministers suggested a willingness on the part of parliament to compromise. In fact, this period was short-lived and by 2011 Kuwait seemed to be heading back towards the familiar cycle of parliamentary obstruction, ministerial resistance, government resignation and looming constitutional crisis.

The questioning of the prime minister and the subsequent events need to be understood in crude political terms, which underline the relative weakness of parliament in relation to government. Although the parliament had undoubtedly won an important constitutional principle in questioning the prime minister, in practice, this does not appear to have made the institution more powerful or influential. In the first place, as Kuwaiti politicians and commentators acknowledge, the point at which the government acceded to the interpellations was only when they knew they had enough support in parliament to win the votes of confidence. The minister for housing and development, Ahmed al-Fahad, was widely acknowledged as the key political figure in putting together a makeshift coalition of politicians to ensure that the prime minister and other ministers would survive. It again reflected the Al-Sabah's traditional strategy of dividing and manipulating any opposition – having secured this, the government could safely accept the principle, but not risk its authority over parliament, at least in the short term.

Such developments were a cause of dismay for many in parliament, not simply because the interpellation mechanism suddenly looked far less effective, but also because of the way in which the tool was being used by politicians. Although the number of interpellations increased during 2010, they were being used in what one MP described as an increasingly 'frivolous' fashion. In one instance, a female opposition politician described her frustration to the author because an interpellation was so badly worded, and the case against

the minister so poorly constructed, that she felt she had no option but to support the minister – even though there were strong reasons for withdrawing parliamentary approval.[2]

2.3. Parliament and popular protest: 2011–12

By 2011, when much of the Arab region was facing upheaval, the Kuwaiti parliament had long been the key institution in terms of the country's political development, with the most significant debates revolving around the constitutional rights of the institution against those of the ruling authorities. Although the dynamic in Kuwait noticeably shifted in 2011, this was partly the result of events in neighbouring countries; but it also reflected a continuation of issues that went to the heart of the Al-Sabah's style of managed reform.

At the start of the year, there were limited protests in parts of Kuwait City, motivated either by calls for the resignation of the prime minister, Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah, or focusing on the citizenship rights of the Bidoon within Kuwait.[3] Parliament's role was marginal in such events, and they dissipated quickly, especially after the government provided additional food subsidies and direct grants of 1,000 Kuwaiti dinar to every citizen. But by March, an unusual combination of events meant that the government was facing three different sets of interpellations, from different groups within the parliament. The most significant was over the interpretation of Kuwait's role in Bahrain, with the Salafist bloc strongly criticizing the foreign minister and prime minister for not sending troops to Bahrain and failing to respond adequately to criticism of Kuwait in the Bahraini media. Although the Shia bloc took a different view of Bahrain, they also interpellated the prime minister, but for different reasons.

Such was the strength of opposition in the parliament that at the end of March the entire government resigned. The prime minister was duly reappointed along with a new cabinet in May, but again they were immediately faced with fresh interpellations from the parliament. On this occasion, though, the government was able to secure a majority in parliament to defer the questioning for a year, thus avoiding any immediate stalemate. It was nonetheless widely recognized that such a situation could not be maintained indefinitely; it was described by one local diplomat as the desperate tactics of a stalling government.

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[2] Where quotations and comments are not referenced, these are drawn from interviews in each of the three countries by the author between 2010 and 2012.

[3] The Bidoon have been a part of Kuwait since independence, when this third of the population were considered to be 'without nationality'. They were thus not naturalized as Kuwaiti citizens and still lack basic citizenship rights, meaning they frequently struggle to get access to education and employment. Campaigns for access to those rights formed the basis of protests during several months in 2011.

Those tactics came to a rather abrupt end in the autumn, particularly following the storming of parliament by protestors in November 2011. The unprecedented invasion of parliament, which appears to have been orchestrated by some members of the opposition, focused on alleged corruption by the prime minister, foreign minister and members of parliament. Most saliently for the parliament, the corruption scandal revolved around the depositing of around 25 million dinars into the bank accounts of pro-government MPs. Although many international media reports suggested that this was evidence of a sudden Arab Spring in Kuwait, it was in many ways simply a reflection of much longer-standing practices. Many local commentators reflected on the fact that the practice of buying MPs' votes was universally known and an accepted part of Kuwait's politics. But the impact of events elsewhere in the region during 2011, and the scale of the sums involved, appear to have acted as a catalyst for both media coverage and public outrage.

The immediate effect was another dissolution and fresh elections in February 2012. However, whereas previous elections were due to a stand-off between government and parliament, the fourth election in six years was a result of public dislike of both government and parliament. Again, opposition MPs did better than previously, and the election saw Islamists from both the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists increase their representation. More significantly, the parliament lifted the immunity of the accused MPs so that they could be prosecuted (most of them were no longer in parliament) and made another significant constitutional gain when, in March 2012, the new prime minister was questioned by parliament in public for the first time.

2.4. Conclusion: back to the future – constitutional strength versus political weakness
In contrast to the parliaments of Bahrain and Oman, the Majlis Al-Umma has been the key arena for political reform, and over fifty years won itself significant concessions. In recent years it has increasingly tested the government – as the successive resignations have shown – but these are occasional, short-term wins. Progress has been uneven and patchy, marked by periods of retrenchment and stasis. Perhaps more significantly, it does not appear that the periodic victories over the government have made the parliament more effective in holding government to account. If anything, those gains have come at the expense of public trust. The stand-offs between government and parliament, the all too frequent cycle of dissolution then elections followed by stalemate, have given the Kuwaiti public little sense of achievement. During 2011, the parliament seemed distant and removed from many of the public concerns,

and protest only served to emphasize the lack of public faith and concern at corruption within the Majlis Al-Umma.

By 2012 the parliament faced many of the same challenges it has always confronted. And these relate more to politics than to constitutional power. The corruption scandal simply highlighted the fact that the Al-Sabah's approach to managed reform has depended to a large extent on their ability to manipulate the members of parliament. Because parliamentary elections do not necessarily provide the government with a natural majority, the regime has always sought to control the increasingly disparate elements within the institution, with varying degrees of success. The scandal has changed that dynamic, at least for the time being, as well as the complexion of parliament itself.

Yet the ability of government to manipulate parliament depends on the willingness of parliament itself to be manipulated. It is less clear whether the scandal will have longer-term implications for that manipulation, or indeed for the ability of parliament to provide constructive opposition to government. There are two dimensions to this. First is the highly personal nature of Kuwaiti politics. As several politicians and commentators told the author, all Kuwaiti politics is local. The selection and re-election of politicians depend to a large extent on their ability to meet the needs of key local figures, all of whom will expect certain services or benefits. This in turn means that the majority of MPs are susceptible to inducements offered in return for their vote. But it also means that politicians tend to be more concerned with the local rather than the national, and thus rarely band together to offer any alternative national vision to that of the government.

Second, although politicians tend to organize themselves in readily identifiable blocs, this is not the same as having formalized political parties. At the most obvious level, politicians stand for election as individuals rather than on a party platform, and the blocs lack the cohesion that is instilled by a common manifesto or programme. Therefore, within the institution they lack the organizational discipline that is central to parliamentary parties.

It is perhaps not surprising that one of the commonest suggestions to strengthen parliament from reforming politicians within Kuwait is the creation of meaningful political parties that contest elections. The argument increasingly heard is that political parties would mean that individual MPs would be less dependent on government patronage to provide local service or to ensure re-election, and that coherent parties would provide policy alternatives within parliament, and thus that it offered greater political resistance to government initiatives.

As it stands, however, the combination of political disorganization and parliament's failure to offer an alternative national vision emphasizes its bigger problem, namely that it has

not clearly defined in the public mind what it is for. For as long as it continues to exist – and continues to cause the government problems – it offers the regime a semblance of democratic credibility. But it has not found a role that makes it indispensable to either government or the public. The government seems able to bypass or manipulate parliament at critical moments, and it is not clear to the vast majority of the public how their interests are being furthered within the institution. The dynamics of parliamentary politics reflect the tussle over power between the parliament and the ruling family, and the particular form of social compact that underpins Kuwait's rentier state. It may be that Kuwait's oil reserves and production capacity mean that it can continue to afford to meet its citizens' expectation for longer than its neighbours, and to defer economic reform. However, it is likely that the future development of Kuwaiti politics will continue to be characterized by a bumpy testing of boundaries between the powers of the elected representatives and those of the Al-Sabah ruling family.

3. BAHRAIN

The movement for political reform in Bahrain started the twenty-first century with a degree of optimism about the country's prospects for a change in the balance of power, with the accession of a new king and proposals to turn the kingdom into a constitutional monarchy in 2000. By 2012, it was difficult to find anything but pessimism. Over the last forty years Bahrain has been far more politically turbulent than Kuwait, with tensions between the Shia population, who make up the majority of Bahrain's citizens, and the Sunni regime, represented by the Al-Khalifa ruling family, spilling out into periods of civil unrest and subsequent state repression.

The Bahraini parliament has played an important symbolic role in those events. Its first, brief lifespan from 1973 to 1975 was followed by unconstitutional dissolution until 2002, when it was reinstated by the new king, partly as a way of defusing civil unrest, but with far less influence or power than its predecessor. Since then battles over the position of the parliament have become a focus for opposition groups demanding greater representation and accountability, while its election periods appeared to be providing a predictable cycle of increased state harassment and victimization of opponents. Over the course of the decade the parliament stumbled along, and although the main Shia party, Al-Wefaq, participated from 2006, the institution was unable to offer much by way of meaningful opposition or vision.

The protests which formed part of the Arab Spring in early 2011, though, fundamentally changed the dynamics in the kingdom. The state's reaction to the protests was violent and forceful and resulted in the resignation from the forty-member parliament of all

eighteen Al-Wefaq members. At the start of 2012, the parliament contained mainly loyalists, and its agenda reflected their interests, rather than those of the nation.

3.1. The roots of protest: 1971–2002

The impact of the Arab Spring on Bahrain, and the role of parliament in those events, have their roots in the recent history of the country. The Al-Khalifa family monopolized power in Bahrain until the country gained independence from Britain in 1971. In an effort to provide greater legitimacy for its rule, the family introduced a constitution in 1973, and held the first elections for the National Assembly in December of that year. The experience was, however, short-lived. Parliament's challenging of government, and particularly its rejection of government proposals for summary powers to arrest those holding views considered to be a threat to the 'security of the state' in 1975, meant that the emir dissolved the body and suspended the constitution in August of that year. The suspension of the parliament was a defining point for many opponents of the regime. And, between 1994 and 1999, dissatisfaction with the political system combined with frustration over social and sectarian inequality, and specifically discrimination against the Shia majority, to create a prolonged period of violence and unrest in Bahrain. The government's response was to detain demonstrators and exile opposition leaders, with suggestions of torture, intimidation and harassment rife (International Crisis Group 2005: 2–3).

The accession of Hamad bin 'Isa Al-Khalifa in 1999 and his promise of reform defused many of these tensions. Within months he opened dialogue with opposition leaders, released detainees and allowed exiled Bahrainis to return. Politically, he suggested a return to the 1973 constitution and established special committees to develop reform proposals, published in December 2000. The resultant 'National Action Charter' stated that Bahrain should become a constitutional monarchy, with the powers of the king kept in check through a new bicameral legislature. The Majlis Al-Nuwab (Council of Representatives) would be directly elected, while the Majlis A'Shura (Consultative Council) would be appointed. The charter was, however, 'uncomfortably vague' on that process of appointment, and indeed on the relationship between the two chambers, causing some concern amongst leading reformers (Peterson 2009: 162). Nonetheless, the subsequent referendum on the constitutional changes in February 2001 resulted in overwhelming approval, with 98.4 per cent of Bahrainis voting in favour.

This, though, proved to be the high point of the reform process. The implementation of the constitution in February 2002 contained various amendments, inserted by the king, which

retained certain key powers for the ruler, including full control of the government and the right to dissolve parliament. Then, in July, the provisions for parliament were published, which clarified the relationship between to the two chambers of parliament, determining that the forty-person Nuwab would be complemented by a forty-person Shura – appointed by the king and able to include members of the ruling family. Critically, in the event of disagreement between the two houses, the Shura would have the casting vote. With limited ability to scrutinize ministers and initiate legislation the Nuwab would be a pale imitation of its predecessor. It was not the return to the 1973 constitution that the king had promised. The changes, and the manner in which they had been implemented, revived concern and distrust amongst reformers. The immediate effect was the decision by four key political groups to boycott the elections scheduled for October.

3.2. Controlled pluralism – politics without parties: 2002–11

After 2002, in contrast with the situation in Kuwait, the Al-Khalifa's style of political management depended less on the direct manipulation of those within parliament than of the system as a whole. The limited powers granted to the parliament, and thus the constellation of forces within the institution, meant it simply posed less of a threat to the rulers. Like Kuwait, Bahrain has no formal political parties, but again de facto parties exist as 'political societies'. The main societies tend to be Islamist movements, of both Shia and Sunni origin, but less ideologically driven than counterparts elsewhere, and they have shown an ability to work with each other, especially on the need for greater political reform. The four societies that boycotted the elections were the predominantly Shia Islamist groups Al-Wefaq and Islamic Action Society, along with the liberal secular National Democratic Society and the secular Progressive National Bloc.

As a result, the most significant debates in the subsequent parliament between 2002 and 2006 mainly pitted the Sunni Islamist groups against each other. They offered little substantial opposition to government, and although the parliament did in that period push for greater powers, it had limited results. Rather, it was the activities of groups outside parliament that set the tone for the subsequent election in 2006. During that period Shia and Sunni political societies pressed for a return to the 1973 constitution, an increase in parliamentary power and a reduction in the influence of the Shura. But it was the government's adoption of a political parties law in 2005 which provided the biggest catalyst. The law was designed to restrict further political activities and meant that political societies had to register or be deemed illegal. In the event, the biggest Shia society, Al-Wefaq, decided to register and

contest the subsequent elections in 2006. (A more hardline splinter group, Al-Haq, broke away from Al-Wefaq at this point and remains formally outside the law.)

Unsurprisingly, turnout in 2006 was markedly higher, at 72 per cent (compared with 53 per cent in 2002), and the Shia Islamists did relatively well, picking up seventeen of the forty seats, plus backing one secular independent Sunni MP. (They repeated this feat in the elections of 2010, again winning eighteen seats, although these were all taken by Al-Wefaq members.) The balance of forces in parliament changed its dynamic after 2006. The simple fact that the parliament now included significant Shia representation meant a more obvious diversity of opinion was articulated and immediately made the institution more lively. Many of the issues, particularly in the early stages of the 2006 parliament, divided along sectarian lines, with Al-Wefaq attempting to redress discrimination against the Shia population in various areas of the economy, employment opportunities and social entitlements. However, their frustration at Sunni opposition and the limited opportunities to influence policy meant they occasionally resorted to walking out of the chamber in order to make the plenary inquorate, and prevent decisions taking place.

Numerous commentators bemoaned the fact that the parties tended to play only to their own constituencies and thus were limited in impact. But towards the end of the parliament, the blocs were occasionally working in conjunction with each other. Parliamentary investigations into contentious issues such as corruption within Gulf Air (the national airline), the selling of land titles and parliamentary oversight of the national budget saw instances of relatively successful cross-party collaboration. Although one local analyst described the quality of the debate as often not getting beyond 'primary school level', it suggested a basis from which the institution could develop its influence.

Despite these small, positive signs, the Bahraini parliament was unable to test the government in a similar fashion to that in Kuwait. Whereas the Kuwaiti parliament was at the forefront of the debate about the constitutional balance of powers, the Bahraini parliament was more marginal. Although politicians argued for greater parliamentary power, their ability to force any issue was much more constrained. And the fact that parliament had struggled to challenge the authority of government meant that the Al-Khalifa style of controlled pluralism up to 2011 was less focused on parliament itself, but characterized by electoral manipulation, harassment of opponents and repression of civil society.

First, the gerrymandering of electoral constituencies to ensure Sunni domination of the parliament has been one of the most contentious issues since the 2006 election. Although Shia citizens account for more than two-thirds of the population, they won less than 50 per cent of

the seats in 2006 and 2010. This was a direct result of the way in which the constituencies are drawn, with the forty electoral districts varying greatly in size: the largest district contains over 12,000 people, in a mainly Shia area, and the smallest – largely Sunni – has only 500 voters (Bertelsmann Stiftung,2009). In addition, the government has sought to expand the Sunni population by granting citizenship to expatriates from Jordan, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia. The size of this exercise was revealed in the 2008 census results, which suggested that the number of Bahraini citizens had increased by 42 per cent (Lawson 2010: 5), and Shia opposition groups claim that between 65,000 and 100,000 additional Sunnis were added to the electoral rolls between 2000 and 2010 (Cambanis 2010).

Second, harassment of opposition candidates and supporters was a significant feature of both the 2006 and 2010 election campaigns. Government tactics gained particular prominence just before the election in 2006 when a report compiled by a former adviser to the Ministry for Cabinet Affairs, Salah al-Bandar, was released suggesting a concerted effort by government to rig the voting system. It claimed that the government had spent around US$6 million to fund anti-Shia, and specifically Al-Wefaq, campaigning. Reports of vote-buying, intimidation of voters and destruction of campaign offices were common in both 2006 and 2010, with opponents arrested, their houses fire-bombed and detainees allegedly tortured by the authorities (Economist 2010).

Third, although Bahrain has a more lively civil society than other countries in the Gulf, the government has sought to place strict limits on that activity – particularly those that seek to monitor government. Most visibly, the security services have gone after various human rights groups in Bahrain, and in 2004 abolished a human rights organization after a string of critical reports. In addition, journalists critical of government are frequently arrested and operate within tightly defined laws. But international democracy promotion organizations have also been prevented from operating in Bahrain. The US National Democratic Institute (NDI) had its licence revoked in the run-up to the 2006 elections, and although it was able to operate from 2007 onwards, it was again effectively thrown out shortly before the 2010 poll. According to another Bahrain-based human rights organization, the NDI's eviction was due to the authorities' fear that the NDI would want to monitor the conduct of the next election, and were training local Bahrainis how to do so (Bahrain Center for Human Rights 2010).

By the end of 2010 it appeared that Bahrain-style managed reform would involve a cycle of increased state repression during election campaigns in order to quell dissent, limit the development of political society and divert any international criticism of the electoral system. In between elections, for as long as the parliament posed no serious challenge to

government, the regime appeared to be loosening their control, while there was less at stake. This dynamic was obviously shattered during 2011.

3.3. Civil unrest and the end of limited pluralism: 2011
On 14 February 2011, activists staged a 'day of rage' in Manama, which focused principally on the need for political and democratic reforms. However, the security forces' response, in which seven people died over the first four days, entrenched and radicalized the protests. Although the demonstrations were not specifically sectarian, the bulk of the protesters were Shia and the demands expanded from the call for democratic change and human rights to reflect a range of socio-economic grievances – not least the institutionalized discrimination against the Shia majority.

In the month following it appeared that dialogue was possible, with the crown prince, Salman bin Hamad bin Al-Khalifa, leading discussions on behalf of the government with the opposition forces. For their part the opposition leaders seemed willing to negotiate, but listed various demands including the abolition of the 2002 constitution, reform of the electoral system and the resignation of the government. On 13 March, the crown prince stated the regime's willingness to compromise in certain key areas, including a parliament with significant powers and fairly drawn electoral constituencies. However, the position of the prime minister – in power for forty-one years, he reportedly enjoys significant personal support from Saudi Arabia and took a far harder line on the opposition forces than did the crown prince and the king – was one of the key issues that could not be resolved. Only a day after the crown prince's statement Saudi Arabia sent 1,000 troops to Bahrain, joined by around 500 from the United Aram Emirates to provide support whilst the Bahraini Defence Force violently crushed the protests.

Parliament's formal role in these developments was tangential. The members of Al-Wefaq stopped participating in parliament days after the initial crackdown in February, and by May all eighteen members had resigned formally from parliament. In July Al-Wefaq also withdrew from the National Dialogue Initiative. The content and tone of debate within parliament reflected its reduced composition, and although there were attempts to question ministers these were at best half-hearted. By-elections to replace the missing Wefaqis took place in September and the new parliament reconvened in October. Although the parliament then contained eight independent Shia MPs they were, according to one local activist, 'mostly well-meaning' but shying away from anything that might be deemed confrontational.

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The parliament has remained marginal, failing to address the key political issues. There was, for example, little discussion of the Manama Document, published in October 2011 by the main opposition groups, recommending wide-ranging constitutional and political reform. And, according to local observers, parliament failed to debate and respond to the key legislative recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, preferring to criticize its chair, M. Cherif Bassiouni, for his approach rather than the substance of his report. Although there was much coverage of the additional powers given to parliament in the spring of 2012, which increase parliament's ability to question ministers, withdraw confidence in government and reject its action plan, these have been widely dismissed as inadequate and inconsequential. One former Al-Wefaq MP commented that the reforms had singularly failed to impress either the opposition, the public or international diplomats based in Bahrain.

The events of 2011 brought to a head the dilemma that had absorbed Al-Wefaq since the first elections in 2002: do they participate in parliament, but run the risk of being co-opted, providing legitimacy to a system which offers little influence? Or do they decide to operate entirely as an external opponent attempting to force change from the outside, but give up any opportunity to shape the formal political process? Their experience of boycotting the first set of elections suggested that they were likely to have more influence, and enjoy a legitimate public platform for their policies, by working in parliament. But the expectation of many of their voters is that they should have delivered far more, a view which undermines public support not only for the party (often attracted to outside organizations such as Al-Haq) but for the parliament as well. Prior to the 2010 election, the bulk of the party's politicians felt that their long-term future lay within the parliamentary system. The events of 2011 effectively took the decision out of their hands, and through publications such as the Manama Document, they are pushing for major constitutional change outside parliament. The line from Al-Wefaq is now that unless the parliament is given significantly more powers, as part of a wider programme of political reform, there seems little chance that the party will opt in once again. But, according to a local analyst, the party was less harmonious than it had ever been. Although it nominally still supports a constitutional monarchy, the longer it remains outside with little impact on the system, the greater get the chances of its fragmenting as calls for more radical reform gain traction (Louër 2012).

3.4. Conclusion: limited pluralism and targeted repression

The fact that Bahrain has a majority Shia population and a minority Sunni regime would suggest that it arguably had more need for a democratic parliament to legitimize that rule than

did other states in the region. In fact, the regime's approach has been cruder and more violent, which may hold in the short term, but does not appear to be a realistic long-term strategy. Unlike Kuwait, Bahrain does not have the oil wealth with which to buy off dissent. Rather, it is heavily dependent on Saudi Arabia, which supplies Bahrain with 140,000 barrels of oil per day (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2009: 19). That Saudi Arabian influence is particularly nervous of Shia domination in Bahrain as it claims it would bolster Iran's position in the region, and potentially inspire its own Shia population in its Eastern Province.

The way in which the Bahraini style of managed reform has evolved, however, provides a parallel with Kuwait, in that both highlight divisions within the ruling family. Opinion is still divided over King Hamad's true motives for constitutional change when he acceded to power. One argument is that he is a genuine reformer but was blown off course early by having to manage other powerful and conservative interests within the ruling family. More recent interpretations put the king and crown prince on the side of reform and negotiation with the protestors, and the prime minister and a coterie of ministers against, supported by allies in Saudi Arabia.

Either way, the purpose of the constitutional changes and the re-creation of the parliament at the start of the century was partly to dissipate some of the lingering tensions between the Shia and Sunni populations, and partly to secure greater legitimacy for Al-Khalifa rule. However, Bahrain provides a telling dimension to Huntington's 'King's Dilemma', in that the creation of the parliament, while the ruling family retains monarchical power, has arguably emphasized and accentuated the original problems it was designed to address. That is, after the turmoil of the 1990s the promise of political reform did much to ease sectarian tension between the Shia and Sunni populations. But those expectations were undermined swiftly by the way in which the parliament's powers were restricted. The performance of the parliament since 2002 has reinforced the public perception that it is a toothless and ineffective body. It has not played the same role as the parliament in Kuwait, as the key forum within which political concessions might be won, and it has delivered few tangible benefits for the majority Shia population.

Instead, the parliament provided a public arena in which the division of interests between Shia and Sunni populations could be aired – but not resolved. Parliamentary debates not only stressed that division in the public mind, but also continued to highlight the way in which the Shia population is discriminated against, and emphasized the limited ability of the parliament to redress these grievances. According to many local commentators, far from easing sectarian tension, the parliament has made it more apparent.

In short, the Al-Khalifa style of managed reform may have worked in the short term, but offers little hope for the long term. It has exacerbated rather than softened the divisions within Bahrain. The violent reaction to the protests in Manama has further undermined the sense that parliament can offer any meaningful opposition to government, and meant that the main opposition now exists outside parliament. In terms of political management, this makes it more difficult to negotiate, compromise and co-opt opposition leaders, as there appears to be increasingly little that the rulers can offer them, short of wide-ranging constitutional reform or continued repression.

Bahrain's parliament will, though, continue to exist in some form, with or without Shia members. Diplomats based in Manama stress the international strategic significance of Bahrain in the region, and the need for it to have at least a semblance of democracy. The need to diversify its economy and its desire to become a business hub, as well as international pressure, they suggest, means the Al-Khalifa family is unlikely to dissolve the parliament entirely. But without significant reforms and the return of the main Shia political parties the existence of the parliament is likely to make very little difference to the lives of most Bahrainis.

4. OMAN

By comparison with those in Kuwait and Bahrain, the process of political liberalization in Oman has proceeded in a slow, quiet and linear fashion and this has been reflected in the way it has dealt with the recent events. The directly elected Majlis A'Shura has not played the same symbolic role as in Kuwait and Bahrain, but has slowly accreted power to itself since the first universal elections in 2003. It is an exercise in extreme top-down reform whose pace is determined almost entirely by the ruling Sultan Qaboos, who, until 2011, faced little domestic or international pressure for change. In comparison with Bahrain, the unrest was relatively minor, but in a country characterized by consensus and placidity under Qaboos, it had a significant effect, resulting in both an economic and a political response. The sultan's initial promises of additional powers to the legislature in the spring of 2011 have been partially realized, but perhaps more significantly, since the elections of 2011 the parliament now appears both more assertive and more accountable to the public. Although the institution still lacks many basic powers, the way in which it has developed recently suggests that it is likely to continue evolving along the same lines, and may play a greater role within Oman's political development

The dynamics of change in Oman need to be understood in relation to two distinct features. The first is the sultan himself. Qaboos came to power in 1970 when he overthrew his father, having been under virtual house arrest since the mid-1960s, seizing power with the tacit support of the British government. However, the accession was contested by his uncle Sayid Tariq bin Taymur, who wanted to establish Oman as a constitutional monarchy, while Qaboos wanted untrammelled monarchical power. Although Tariq was made prime minister, he had resigned by the end of 1971, and central authority as well as the legitimacy of the state were concentrated in the person of the sultan (Valeri 2006: 187). Although he was widely regarded as a benign ruler, there could be no doubt that the state was to be run as an autocracy. The Basic Law (effectively the constitution) established in 1996 enshrined leadership in the sultan and stated that public activities remained 'the prerogative of the state' (Siegfried 2000: 372).

Second, the political culture is infected at every level with the 'Omani way', which, broadly, means that any change is consistent with Omani culture and tradition (Jones and Ridout 2005; Rabi 2002). On its own this means that reforms proceed slowly, but that pace is further tempered by the overarching emphasis on consultation and consensus. It is not a coincidence that Oman's principal representative body is the Majlis A'Shura (Consultative Council), rather than the Majlis Al-Umma (People's Council) in Kuwait or the Majlis Al-Nuwab (Council of Representatives) favoured in Bahrain. Ultimately, the legitimacy of the institutions comes 'not only from the principle of representation but also from consultation, which, in Oman, also functions as principle, or an end in itself' (Jones 2007: 169).

The first steps towards representation took place in 1991 when the Majlis A'Shura was formed, with representatives of fifty-nine constituencies (*wilayah*) chosen by notables in each of those areas. Although it had very limited powers, ministers would be obliged to report to the Shura on their activity. The electorate was gradually expanded over the course of the next decade until 2003, when the first full elections were held under universal franchise. By the 2007 elections the Shura had eight-four members, who competed on the basis of names only, but were for the first time able to employ campaign techniques such as posters and advertisements. The Shura was complemented by the creation of the Majlis A'Dawla in 2000, as an upper, appointed body, a move which was widely welcomed.

The powers of the Shura were, however, effectively limited to economic matters. It could not initiate legislation, it had limited ability to comment on government bills and the key offices of state – which reside with the sultan – such as defence and foreign affairs remained beyond the purview of the institution. The turnout for elections has been relatively poor, at

around 30 per cent, perhaps because, in the words of one author, the Shura resembles 'a depoliticised local council' (Rabi 2009: 216). The limitations on the Shura's powers, combined with the continuing absence of political parties, means that elections are relatively meaningless, offering citizens only a choice between local dignitaries rather than competing visions of government.

The problems of the Majlis reflect the context within which it operates. Conversations with individuals in civil society, the media and the State Council identified three themes. First, the personification of the state in the form of the sultan himself makes any sort of opposition difficult, because it is not possible to distinguish between opposing the government and opposing the state, or the sultan as well. Second, the Majlis shares this desire for public consensus and what one activist described as 'unhealthy displays of unity'. The five-year national plans which have characterized Oman's development under Qaboos were simply 'forty pages of everything is going OK'. Omanis in and around the Majlis argued that members give ministers a hard time in private, but it is the emphasis on consensus that the public sees. This means that, third, the public has very little understanding of what the Majlis does, as there are few public or visible indications of its work or impact. Between 2007 and 2010 the Majlis thus became an easy target for derision, particularly from key cabinet ministers seeking to undermine its influence further – with many arguing that the institution was stronger when its membership was appointed, because it meant the quality of members was higher.

4.1. Unrest and incremental change: 2011

Under Sultan Qaboos, Oman's political development appears remarkably limited, especially by comparison with Bahrain and Kuwait. However, understanding the events of 2011 and the sultan's response to them means putting that process of change into context. First, all Omani politics revolves around the issue of succession to the sultan because he has no named heir, and it remains unclear who will take his place. Although there is a process in place, involving the ruling family's attempts to agree an appointment, the fallback is that the sultan has named a successor whose identity is contained in two envelopes held securely in different parts of the country. Unsurprisingly, there is a huge amount of uncertainty and speculation about what will happen when the sultan dies, but very little public discussion of the possible implications.

It is perhaps the danger of a political vacuum that has prompted some of the reforms. It is significant, as mentioned, that the moves towards greater representation before 2011 came from the sultan himself, who faced no obvious public pressure for such moves. According to

Kechichian (2006) it was a recognition that emancipation would need to come at some stage, that it would not happen quickly, and that it was better controlled by the sultan, but 'that once such a step was initiated, it would be impossible to set the process back' (2006: 51). Progress may have been slow, but this controlled evolution has not been marked by the sorts of regressive and repressive steps taken in Kuwait and Bahrain.

The need for change may also reflect both demographic and economic imperatives. Oman has one of the highest rates of population growth in the world, estimated at around 3.5 per cent a year. This presents an economic challenge to the rentier model. Although oil is still the mainstay of its economy, accounting for around half of the country's GDP, its natural resources are far lower than those of its neighbours and the country has gone further in privatizing and diversifying the economy (Ahmad 2008). But it is estimated that the number entering the job market each year will increase by 212 per cent by 2035, and that the economy will need to find 700,000 new jobs in that period (Kechichian 2006: 87). With structural unemployment estimated at somewhere between 12 per cent and 15 per cent, economic performance is likely to have a strong bearing on the politics of Oman in coming years.

The by-product of that population growth is not only that Oman has a very young population, but that there is an emerging generational divide. For those who remember the sultan's accession, his rule has brought peace and stability to a land that was wracked by bloody wars. However, for anyone under the age of forty whose aspirations for Oman go beyond the absence of war, this history is increasingly irrelevant. Rather, it presents a challenge on the political front as the political expectations of this younger generation, particularly those educated in the West, may outstrip the speed of reform in Oman (Rabi 2009: 217). By the end of 2010 this generational difference was increasingly evident not just in civil society, but even within the Majlis and the cabinet.

The unrest that emerged in the early part of 2011 reflected a number of these trends. Although deadly violence broke out in Sohar, other demonstrations were mostly peaceful and their principal driver was economic rather than political, particularly to do with employment and standards of living. In response the sultan raised the minimum wage, promised to create 50,000 new jobs and set up employment benefit for job seekers.

It was also significant that, unlike in other countries, the sultan was not the target of the demonstrations. Although the protesters' complaints went on to include the level of corruption, they were less overtly political than in Bahrain or elsewhere. Yet the sultan's political response was marked – he swiftly removed twelve ministers and drew new ministers from the Majlis itself, to create a cabinet that was, in the words of one commentator, 'far more

representative of Oman than its predecessor'. In total the sultan issued around forty royal decrees instituting political reforms, including making key public bodies accountable and granting new powers to the state audit body. Perhaps more importantly, the sultan announced that the role and powers of the Majlis would be changed. Establishing a committee to examine the reform of the Majlis, the sultan indicated that the body would be given legislative powers for the first time and that members of the cabinet would be drawn from amongst its members.

In typically Omani fashion, progress since has been slow, but significant nonetheless. The Shura has been granted new powers on issues related to auditing and votes of confidence, but still lacks the power to initiate legislation. However, the more significant changes are less to do with the institution's formal powers than with the way in which its members are seeking to use those powers, and the way it is perceived by the public.

Public and political interest in the Shura seemed markedly higher in the run-up to the elections in October 2011. Following the announcement of new legislative powers, the sultan reopened the lists for candidates, and reports suggested that in Mattra, for instance, the number of candidates went up from 5 to 35, while in Seeb they increased from 40 to around 100. In total, 1,330 candidates registered, a 70 per cent increase on the 2007 poll, and turnout was recorded at around 76 per cent (Katzman 2012c: 5).

This public interest has further shaped the way in which the Shura has operated subsequently, with a far greater emphasis on openness and transparency. In an unprecedented move, it established its own YouTube channel in 2012, and television broadcasts of parliamentary sessions have increased citizen interest in its deliberations. In turn, members appear to be staking their claim as defenders of the public interest, and according to local analysts the institution has much greater concern for public accountability.

This, in turn, appears to be changing the way the Shura engages with government. The royal decree of 2011 outlined some of the details of Majlis reform, including powers to amend draft laws and budgets as well as the ability to elect its own chair, but one former parliamentary staff member sees genuine progress made not so much in terms of powers granted, but in the way existing powers are being used under heightened popular scrutiny. The Shura appears to be increasingly assertive in its questioning of ministers – perhaps indicative of this is a recent terminological shift that describes the appearance of a minister before the Majlis as an *istijwab* (questioning) rather than a *munaqasha* (conversation). Such a development hardly registers on the regional political scale, especially given the seismic events occurring elsewhere in the Gulf, but the growing assertiveness of the Shura has led some to speak of a 'cold war' between it and the government. In short, membership of the

Shura suddenly appears to be more attractive, potentially offering a route to political influence that had not previously existed. Partly as a result, the Shura is enjoying greater influence as an institution within Oman.

4.2. Conclusion: political management and the promise of reform
It is far too early to judge whether the Majlis A'Shura is on its way to becoming more like a parliament; however, the trajectory of that political change and the factors that are driving it make Oman a particularly interesting country within the region. Unlike in other MENA countries, demands for reform are principally about the livelihood and economic position of Omanis – especially in relation to the large imported workforce. The social and economic catalysts that exist are not of the same order as those that have characterized the protests elsewhere, Oman does not have the sort of sectarian divisions that wrack Bahrain and it has more successfully diversified its economy than a country like Kuwait. It undoubtedly suffers some of the problems of the traditional rentier state, but there have been few specific demands for political reform, as in other countries. Although there are undoubtedly those who feel strongly that the pace of political change needs to quicken, it is not clear how widely this view is shared. As such, the sultan's swift and, by Omani standards, radical response has given many local activists grounds for cautious optimism.

Yet the sultan's management of political tensions is often more subtle than widely recognized. Towards the end of 2010 – around the time that the sultan's forty years in power were being celebrated with numerous national holidays – discussions with local NGOs, politicians and journalists suggested that it was widely recognized that the cabinet contained two factions manoeuvring for power to succeed the sultan. The political changes allowed the sultan to reshape the cabinet entirely and remove those ministers vying for power. At the same time, although the sultan himself is widely regarded as a benign and popular ruler, by acting decisively he has diverted any potential criticism and shown himself responsive to public concern. In some ways, he has again positioned himself above the political fray.

Given that context, the Shura has not played the same pivotal role in Omani politics as its counterparts have in Kuwait and Bahrain, either in pushing for constitutional change, or in being regarded as symbolic of the struggle for political reform. As such, the style of managed reform has been markedly different in Oman: a process of slow, incremental but nonetheless linear progress, driven from above. Oman appears to be facing a generational change which may alter that dynamic in the coming years, and it seems that the activity of the Majlis A'Shura may be reflecting some of that change. If anything the members of the institution

seem more eager and willing to use the powers at their disposal than their counterparts, for the first time drawing strength from and utilizing the public interest in their work.

It may be that the Majlis could develop a significant role, and could still play a pivotal part in managing the succession of the ruler. It may also be that the ongoing political reforms might, at some point, mean the creation of a prime ministerial post for the first time. Yet few are willing to speculate. The process of managed reform in Oman ultimately depends on the sultan himself, who, despite the reforms, appears to enjoy as much control over the process as he has ever done.

5. CONCLUSION: PARLIAMENTARY ORGANIZATION AND THE USE OF POLITICAL POWER

Until the events of 2011, analysis of Middle East politics tended to focus on the notion of 'Arab exceptionalism', but often with an underlying assumption that democratization is, ultimately, inevitable (Anderson 2006: 209). Several authors have compared the political development of some GCC countries to the evolution of Europe's nation states into constitutional monarchies (e.g. Herb 2009b: 134–5), suggesting, implicitly, that the countries will sooner or later develop broader forms of representative democracy. Although recent events suggest that the political balance might be slowly shifting, political liberalization in the Gulf remains a process of top-down, managed reform which preserves the power and position of the autocrats who rule these countries.

The three parliaments examined in this paper have played important but distinct roles in each of the countries, and the events of the Arab Spring presented a stress test for both the rulers' styles of political management and the parliamentary institutions themselves. They all responded differently. In Kuwait, the Al-Sabah family had used the parliament as a forum for managing demands for greater constitutional power, as members pushed for the rights to question ministers and challenge government. That process of management has frequently resulted in stalemate, with both sides able to claim small victories. But the process has often been destructive and, in the long term, may simply be undermining the public's faith in the institution's ability to achieve anything meaningful.

In Bahrain, the Al-Khalifa family's response to the protests in early 2011 effectively destroyed any sense that the parliament could play any meaningful role in the kingdom. Given that the parliament was created as part of their political strategy in 2002, in part to manage tensions between Sunni and Shia populations, it singularly failed to do so. As mentioned, the Majlis Al-Nuwab provided a forum for airing the tensions between the two communities but offered no ways of resolving them. The continuation of the parliament without any Al-Wefaq

representation only serves to highlight the failure of the rulers' approach to managed reform – they now have no one to negotiate with, and are almost entirely dependent on repression to secure their authority.

In Oman, the Majlis A'Shura has never had the same symbolic value as the parliaments in Kuwait and Bahrain, but the country has never faced the same political drivers for change or sectarian tensions. As a result, the institution has not been the forum within which the sultan has sought to manage those pressures. Rather the Shura appears a secondary mechanism by which the ruler can highlight his commitment to consultation with the people. But since early 2011 its efforts at public accountability and assertiveness with government suggest that it is more sensitive to the interests of its voters than either of the other parliaments. It still remains weak, and often tangential, and the change is slow, but it is nonetheless significant.

The events of the Arab Spring seemed to emphasize the distance between these institutions and what was happening outside. The subsequent paths were determined almost entirely by local and national issues rather than ideologically driven movements for democracy. The fundamental question is how well suited these institutions are to such a challenge, should it arise. The experience in other parts of the MENA region is that the parliaments which helped to prop up the previous regime needed to be radically reformed to secure any sort of legitimacy. How far these institutions can play that role is likely to depend on their ability not just to respond to public concerns, but to find ways of providing and delivering alternatives to the government. So far, where they have been effective, their victories have tended to be short-lived, tactical wins, creating a nuisance for the government but not really offering any sort of genuine oversight or accountability. In all three countries, the process of reform is still being controlled by the regimes, and the future of the parliaments in each remains uncertain.

Generally speaking, there are three key challenges which the parliaments need to overcome, if they are to be more effective. First, across the Arab world the concept of a 'loyal opposition' that sits at the core of many parliamentary systems is poorly developed. It is still difficult for opposition groups to claim that they support the state but oppose the policies of the government, when the prime minister, the ruling family and the state are synonymous in the public mind. Opposition groups have to go out of their way to make that distinction clear, but often find the nuance is lost in public debate. This, of course, benefits the ruling regimes, who are then able to demonize any opposition as enemies of the state.

Second, in each of these states the parliament is weakened by the limited nature of political society. Although each of the regimes has sought to limit the power of the parliamentary institutions, the formal power of the parliament is arguably not as important as the way in which that power is used by politicians. As Kuwait shows, a parliament can wrest what look like significant powers from the government only to find that MPs are unwilling or unable to use them to call the government to account. The government's ability to manipulate the institutions is most obviously enhanced by the lack of political parties, meaning that even where parliamentary blocs exist, they lack the discipline and cohesion to organize the parliament effectively. When MPs are dependent solely on local opinion for their re-election, rather than on a party platform, they can be far more easily manipulated by government. As Brumberg notes, the survival strategies for autocratic rulers are designed to prevent the emergence of any effective political society (Brumberg 2002: 64), allowing them to split the opposition and undermine the effectiveness of the parliamentary institution as a whole. But, by the same token, opposition movements 'have not proven themselves able to capitalise on the regimes' need to burnish their democratic credentials to wrest concessions or enlarge the political space within which they are allowed to operate' (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2009: 11).

Third, in turn, this further weakens the claims of the parliament and the political blocs to political and public legitimacy. All of the parliaments are struggling to find a distinctive role within their respective political systems. At present they have neither entirely convinced the public of the benefits that they bring nor created a role in the administration of the state which gives them a unique and clear authority. In short, they have not made themselves indispensable to rulers or ruled. That said, it is difficult to imagine any of those parliamentary institutions being abolished entirely. They were established to provide new sources of legitimacy for the regime and outlets for public concern, and although that legitimizing role is somewhat attenuated (particularly in Bahrain), without them those rulers would face increased difficulties in governing and managing internal tensions.

As Ghassan Salame suggested in 1994, political liberalization is not so much the result of struggle for democracy as the end product of complex social phenomena (Salame 1994: 16). Political change in the Gulf region and across the Arab world in the coming years will be determined not so much by arguments about forms of governance as by questions of identity, religious and ethnic politics, economic development and the dynamics of the rentier state (Anderson 2006: 209). The role of parliaments in each of these countries will depend less on their ability to secure more formal power for themselves than on the way they use those powers – and the role they play in shaping each of those key debates.

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