

## **Political Reform in GCC countries Wednesday, 5 April 2006**

### Seminar Report

The Civility Programme at the Foreign Policy Centre organised a seminar to assess political developments in the GCC countries and determine the direction and future prospects of reform in the region. Neil Partrick, Senior Analyst at EIU, Dr Emma Murphy from Durham University and Dr Gerd Nonneman from Lancaster University delivered presentations at this event.

In bringing the three speakers together, the seminar attempted to address the following key questions:

- ❖ What are the steps taken to promote political reform within the GCC and what is the progress made by different countries?
- ❖ What are the internal and external pressures for reform in the GCC region?
- ❖ What is the relationship between technology and democratisation and what lessons can we draw from the experience of the GCC countries?
- ❖ What are the direction and future prospects of reform in the GCC countries?

### Introduction

Neil Partrick's opening statements indicated the need to recognise the particularities of each of the GCC countries and the diversity of their political circumstances. Reform experiments range from the Kuwaiti model with the oldest and most firmly established parliament to the UAE where cautious discussions about electoral participation have only recently started. In between are Qatar, Oman and Bahrain with partially elected advisory councils and assemblies that have limited mandates.

Neil Partrick noted that the institutional framework historically associated with the development and consolidation of reform is largely absent in the GCC countries. Arguably, royal families are the only visibly active political institutions and they operate in a manner akin to a political party. Debate and power tensions exist within these 'parties' and explain the dominant concern within the GCC countries with the question of succession. Moreover, undefined hereditary laws in a number of GCC countries have intensified their populations' preoccupation with succession.

The sheikhdoms and monarchies of the GCC continue to operate a patronage system where the concept of taxing nationals is unlikely to become a priority for sometime. High oil prices maintain the patron state and ensure the continuity of the current system of governance.

In the meantime, security remains a priority for the region with concerns over the growth of Sunni radicalism and the potentially detrimental impact of a withdrawal of coalition troops from Iraq.

### Impetus for Reform

When analysing external pressures for reform in the GCC, many commentators argue the role of particular actors such as the EU or the United States. However, Dr Gerd Nonneman suggested the need to account for the international environment, or the "spirit of the age", as an external force for change. The pressures of a globalised world whose foundations are invariably liberal have undoubtedly had an impact on the domestic environment of GCC countries and the opinions held by their populations. Moreover, globalisation, and particularly economic globalisation, intensifies pressures on rulers to be more transparent and accountable in the administration of state resources.

Dr Nonneman highlighted the importance of a comparative approach when examining reform pressures in the Arab world. While there is no single model for democratic transition, the experiences of different regions, like Eastern Europe or South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, offer a wealth of lessons for how the process might take shape among the GCC countries. Case studies have shown that while liberalisation can take hold in a number of countries, the move from liberalisation towards democratisation is not necessarily inevitable.

A number of theorists, such as Rostow and Lipset, locate economic growth, and particularly the emergence of a middle class, as a force for democratisation. Dr Nonneman however noted that theorists like Lipset do not account for circumstances where a middle class is created and sustained by the state and has therefore an interest in perpetuating the distribution of power in their country. Dr Nonneman argued that it is not so much the increase in wealth and economic growth that affects democratisation but rather economic change and the redistribution of resources in a society. Economic change effectively creates alternative bases of power and constituencies that will contest the political status quo and claim a voice in the decision making process. It is therefore important to assess whether the distribution of rent in the Gulf States has led to an accumulation of wealth in a middle class with an interest in reform and enough power to begin making political demands.

With the exception of Saudi Arabia, another factor that has prompted reform is the small size of Gulf States. This makes a political reform process more manageable for regimes. Moreover, the relative stability that these countries enjoy offers rulers a unique opportunity to engage with and drive political reform in a controlled manner.

### Technology and Democratisation

For sometime now, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has been promoted by international organisations as a vehicle for institutionalising and consolidating democratic practices in the Arab world. International financial agencies, aid and development organisations as well as the EU and the US have integrated an ICT component into their programmes. Dr Murphy noted that the assumption underlining this is that the proliferation of ICT will drive democratic transitions by:

- a. Empowering individuals by ensuring access to and exchange of information
- b. Challenging the monopoly of the state over information provision
- c. Giving voice to new/marginalised communities
- d. Challenging traditional forms of social organisation.

However, it is often argued that given unequal ownership, predominantly by Western actors, ICT constitutes a new form of cultural imperialism. Furthermore, access to ICT is unequal and determined by an ability to pay as well as one's social and political circumstances. As Dr Murphy pertinently argued, access to ICT in the Arab world is particularly low as a result of key structural factors: poor telecom infrastructure, the slow pace of privatisation, high price of access and weak and non-independent regulation.

The GCC offers an interesting case study for internet penetration in the Arab world. The internet was only recently introduced in the GCC, with usage still limited and uneven in distribution. Filtering mechanisms have been used extensively by the state, partly in response to the cultural concerns of GCC populations. Societies in the Gulf see a role for the state as acting to protect cultural values. This has been used by the state as a cover for political censorship. There has yet been no sufficient or open debate in the region as to where the limits of state filtering of the internet should be. Different states in the region are more prone to censorship of the internet, and particularly politically relevant sites, than others. Saudi Arabia's censorship activities for example include blocking the websites of human rights' organisations while the Qatari government confines itself sites deemed morally unacceptable.

In fact, GCC societies see the state as a protector of cultural values and therefore do not necessarily object to its censorship activities. However, Dr Murphy noted that Saudi Arabia's censorship activities for example include blocking the websites human rights', and particularly women's rights, organisations.

ICT in the form of satellite television channels have encouraged pluralism and a degree of editorial independence in the region. The GCC countries are characterised by close relationships between commercial interests and royal families. Given this relationship, Dr Murphy suggested that this leads to a level of self censorship where channels are reluctant to push editorial lines to the extent of allowing political criticisms of regimes.

Dr Murphy's presentation concluded with a caution against assuming that democratisation will be an inevitable by-product of ICT. Ownerships of ICT will determine the extent to which they can be used to access a plurality of viewpoints and perspectives while the limited access those populations have to ICT further determines the extent to which they are mobilised by it. Dr Murphy further noted that the state continues to be an active agent in ICT promotion and will exert its influence in how ICT is applied.

### Concluding Remarks

Each of the three speakers noted GCC rulers' central role in the reform process, whether to ensure that women's voting rights receive parliamentary approval or in determining the degree of ICT penetration. Reform has tended to be top down and largely in response to external and internal pressures for greater accountability and participation. The key question here is whether rulers are willing to push the reform process forward and how this is likely to take shape. Essentially, therefore whether recent developments are indicative of a long term process of change?

A focus on individual country processes is imperative. Recent activism by the Kuwaiti parliament in determining the outcome of succession is a particularly interesting case study to explore. It is probably the only contemporary example of an Arab parliament asserting its will and determining a country's head office. Municipal elections in May as well as parliamentary elections later in the year in Bahrain are a further example of individual country dynamics that require further analysis.

Deeper and more targeted examinations of each country's circumstances are essential as we proceed further. The Civility Programme is looking to organise further seminars that will look at particular case studies within the GCC, assess whether recent developments are indicative of a long term process of change and determine the factors that will shape the reform process into the future. More generally, we are looking into initiating research on ICT, the youth and political reform.