The Resilience of Arab Spring Monarchies

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Weathering the Storm: Explaining the Resilience of Arab Monarchies in the face of the Arab Spring

Introduction

Ignited by the self-immolation of a young Tunisian vegetable seller on 18 December 2010 in protest of police brutality and corruption, what has now come to be known as the Arab Spring has led to major protests and civil unrest throughout the Arab world, impacting nearly every country of the MENA region and so far resulting in the toppling of the authoritarian regimes of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Given the breadth of the protest wave, we are then faced with the puzzle that while protests in some states have led to revolutionary changes in prevalent authoritarian regimes, some states have only faced minor unrest or have so far been able to thwart and survive more major trends of protest. In this context, this paper seeks to address the question of whether Arab monarchs, as opposed to authoritarian presidents of neighbouring Arab republics, are better able to withstand the Arab Spring.

Shadi Hamid argues that two models of democratic change are emerging in the Arab world following the events of 2011. The first applies to Arab republics, where the entire regime is toppled and its authoritarian leader is then ousted from office. The second model, which applies to monarchies, is based on movement towards constitutional reform within the monarchical structure of the regime.[1] In line with Hamid's argument, I contend that the consequences of the Arab Spring will be different for monarchies as opposed to republics, as Arab monarchs are more equipped and better able to withstand the Arab Spring.

The continuing prevalence of absolutist monarchies in the MENA region, given the near-extinction of this regime-type in the rest of the world, is a curious phenomenon. However, it is important to note that not all modern monarchies of the region have survived to this date. Therefore, determining the characteristics of the remaining monarchies that have aided their survival more generally through the tumultuous 2oth century will be illuminating in understanding their resiliency in the face of the Arab Spring. In this light, this paper will address our question in two sections: the first focusing on factors endogenous to the regimes themselves, and the second elaborating on the impact of factors exogenous to the regime in explaining the resilience of monarchical regimes, as opposed to authoritarian republics, in the face of the Arab Spring.

Endogenous Factors

There exist factors endogenous to all modern Arab monarchical regimes to which we can attribute their resilience in the face of the Arab Spring. The first and perhaps the most important of these in the context of the Arab Spring is that all of the eight monarchies existing today are able to foster a degree of legitimacy in their governance that presidents cannot attest to, deeming the overthrow of the monarchy in the name of democratization a more formidable task that is less imaginable by their people. Furthermore, varying structural factors of the regimes also play a significant role in their resilience. In general, the survival of monarchical regimes is contingent on their institutional flexibility in attentive management of the regime's coalition of supporters and society at large.[2] The eight modern Arab monarchies vary, however, in their relationship between the regime coalition and society, leading to varying survival strategies.

Fostering Legitimacy

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Monarchs tend to be able to draw on historical or religious legitimacy in justifying their rule and retain some degree of popularity and immunity.[3] Authoritarian presidents of republics lack this legitimacy, fundamentally putting them at a disadvantage relative to their monarch counterparts in the context of the Arab Spring. Despite the varying processes and causalities of public demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya – it was that their presidents' rule did not hold any legitimacy in the peoples eyes that served as a common driving factor, coupled with their varying grievances that led to such forceful unified revolt resulting in the toppling of the regime. Thus, it was easy to imagine the state without the president or incumbent regime, whereas monarchies tend to be "part of their country's 'political DNA'"[4]. The impact of perceived legitimacy on monarchical resilience can be examined in three ways: through role of modern Arab monarchies in state formation and nation building, through the role of historical, divine, or religious claims to legitimacy, and finally through the consequences of the nature of paradigmatic differences between republics and monarchies.

The role of modern Arab monarchies in the process of state formation and – perhaps more importantly – nation building has played a major role in fostering their legitimacy. In fact, in her study on the absolutism and resilience of Middle East monarchies, Lisa Anderson asserts that the relative strength of the monarchy does not lie in anything but its affinity with the projects of nation building and state formation.[5] In this light, it is important to remember that almost all monarchies of the MENA region, with the exception of Oman and Morocco, are creations of the 20th century. Thus, "the regime usually pre-dates the sate and the nation"[6], leading for the regime to then build a state and nation around itself rather than deconstruct an already existing nation in its rule. Thus, modern Arab monarchies, generally employed by former colonial European states as means for effective state-formation within colonially drawn lines, have been able to mold entire national identities with the royal family centrally legitimating this identity.[7]

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, emerging as a British mandate following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War 1, serves as an example of a successful project of 20th century nation-building in the Middle East in this way. Although the Hashemite family originally hails from Mecca in Western Arabia and was handed over the Transjordan area occupied by different ethnic and social groups by the British in the 1920s, many citizens of Jordan today will call themselves "Jordanian", as opposed to primarily identifying with their ethnic lineage.[8] Furthermore, despite the significant ethnic cleavage between East and West Bankers in Jordan today, in addressing the issue, no prominent Jordanian Palestinians call for separation, while all are integrationist and in support of the regime, "looking to their leadership for hope and direction".[9] Apart from the example of Jordan, the formation of the Saudi Arabian state and nation was a result of the conquest of territory by a tribal alliance with the assistance of British and U.S. assistance.[10] Thus, it is impossible to separate the national identity of Saudi Arabia from the royal al-Saud family itself. In Kuwait and Morocco, colonial powers recruited and manipulated ruling families to provide administration for colonial rule.[11] In all these examples, the monarchy existed before the modern state, supplying the unique advantage to ruling families of creating a state and nations whose identity would be contingent on the existence of the monarchy itself. Comparing state formation projects of modern Arab monarchies with those of republics, we see that authoritarian presidents in this light cannot possibly represent the same kind of legitimacy that monarchs can to their people, due to the nature of the nations themselves.

Many monarchies also claim legitimacy on the grounds of religion, divinity, or history. Both the royal families of Jordan and Morocco claim to be descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, while King Mohammed VI is commonly called 'Commander of the Faithful', implicitly asserting their families' divine right to rule.[12] Perhaps the clearest example of a monarchy that claims legitimacy through religion, however, is Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is often referred to as "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques", referring to Mecca and Medina.[13] The nature of the founding of Saudi Arabia – through the political authority of the al-Saud family and the religious leadership of the al-Wahhab – along with subsequent religious characteristics of the state such as the active political role given to the ulama, as well as the fact that its judicial system is based on sharia law, all enforce the religious legitimacy of the royal family. This, in turn, makes opposition to the state a complicated and difficult endeavor; as to challenge the state would seem to be challenging aspects of Islam itself. States such as Morocco, Oman, or Bahrain may also claim legitimacy through their families' history. Despite being a country of Shia majority and a Sunni ruling family "that has never really reconciled the narratives of the Khalifa family's long-ago conquest"[14], the close to 200 year reign of the al-Khalifa family grants them some degree of historical legitimacy that many authoritarian presidents of republics cannot attest to. The presence of the Alouite dynasty in Morocco from 1666 to the present day also grants

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the Moroccan monarchy a similar degree of legitimacy – it would be difficult for the Moroccan people to imagine their country without its monarchy.

We lastly touch upon the importance of the role that the paradigmatic differences between a monarchy and a republic play in fostering the legitimacy of authoritarian rule. In other words, as republics are nominal democracies, presidents will necessarily 'pretend that people have a voice' by holding elections and other such means, whereas "with the monarchy, no one's pretending there's a democracy".[15] In Mubarak's Egypt, the political system appeared to have all the devices for a constitutional and democratic political system. In practice, however, skewed elections, restrictions on freedom of organization, and broad presidential appointive powers created a system where all lines of authority ultimately led back to the president.[16] This is not unique to pre-transition Egypt – such means to maintain authoritarian rule while maintaining a façade of democracy characterized politics in pre-transition Egypt and Libya, as it does in Syria, Algeria and Yemen. With their people living within such blatantly corrupt democratic political systems, nominally granted the rights and freedoms of a democracy while experiencing the insignificance of their vote every election period, it is not surprising that authoritarian presidents will then be perceived as utterly illegitimate in the eyes of the masses. Furthermore, some autocrats such as Gaddafi and Mubarak were preparing their sons to succeed them, where President Bashar Assad of Syria did in fact succeed his father. "People in a monarchy expect their son to take over power… In what are nominally republics, there was a lot of resentment from seeing sons taking power."[17] Monarchs thus avoid such problems associated with maintaining authoritarian rule in the framework of a republic, that will in turn fuel perceived lack of legitimacy for the ruler, making authoritarian presidents more vulnerable to the Arab Spring.[18]

Structural Factors: Dynastic vs. Linchpin Monarchies

Following our examination of the impact of perceived legitimacy, we now aim to determine the structural characteristics of modern Arab monarchies that can explain their resiliency during the Arab Spring. There are a few common structural characteristics that modern Arab monarchies generally share. First, the monarch is a personalistic ruler, although he does not rule alone and rather stands at the center of a regime coalition that may include a large social base. A degree of political pluralism is allowed and sometimes encouraged, although the masses usually tend to be politically quiescent or mobilized along clientelistic lines. Additionally, the monarchy will usually be legitimized through being constitutionally organized, although the constitution will grant the monarch unchecked power.[19] Following from these characteristics, the endurance of monarchies will then be contingent on their institutional flexibility in attentive management of the regime's coalition of supporters and society at large.[20] However, modern Arab monarchies have varying relationships with their regime coalitions and society, leading to differences in the degree and nature of necessary institutional flexibility. Although none of the Arab monarchies are identical, we can characterize the eight Arab monarchies as either linchpin or dynastic monarchies, and draw different conclusions regarding survival strategies amongst these different types of monarchies.[21]

In linchpin monarchies, the royal family usually participates only in the political institutions of the monarchy and not the state bureaucracy.[22] Jordan and Morocco are the prime examples of this type monarchical regime. Rulers of linchpin monarchies operate from above the fray of tribal, ethnic, or religious divisions within his state, acting as a linchpin in balancing, manipulating, and controlling vertical cleavages within a pluralistic society.[23] Therefore, insofar as the monarch is strategic in promoting mobilization of different groups through his benevolent patronage, opposition will have difficulty finding common ground in their interests and unifying against the monarchy. Rather, they will tend to compete directly with each other while expressing positive attention vertically up towards the monarchy.[24]

We can see an example of this in the way Jordan responded to its 1989 parliamentary elections, which resulted in opposition taking more than half the seats in parliament. In response to this initial unsettling response, the regime changed the electoral law for the 1993 elections to a one-person, one-vote system. Also, the new electoral law set a few uneven electoral districts that tended to be monarchy loyalists.[25] It is clear to see how the Jordanian monarchy was both mobilizing and containing political opposition through its reform of electoral, and the strategy worked in their favour. More generally, reform in Jordan tends to be in the form of intra-elite bargaining, while political opposition is "peaceful and reformist, rather than violent and revolutionary".[26] Morocco also serves as an example in promoting

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political pluralism. William Zartman, in explaining the nature of Moroccan political opposition, argues that "… as long as the king gives parties a minimum, consultative role in the present formation of policy and as long as he is able to keep alive their future hopes of governing, their interests as pressure groups are better served by playing the game than by challenging the system". Thus, in the case of Morocco, it is important for the king to at least minimally maintain political opposition, because if he were to completely destroy it, he would decrease their stakes in the system and provide interest in completely destroying it.[27]

Comparing such strategies to politics in authoritarian republics like Gaddafi's Libya or Mubarak's Egypt, we see vast differences. Egypt holds a history of excessive repression of political and social pluralism, stemming from the Nasserist extreme pan-Arab socialist ideology following the military coup of 1952. Pre-transition, the Muslim Brotherhood was banned, the regime used legal constraints and security measures to curb the potential of growth of civil society, and went as far as to arrest prominent Egyptian academics who had criticized the possibility of power transfer from Husni Mubarak to his son Gamal.[28] In this light, Mona El-Ghobashy explains that the fall of the regime was due primarily to joint mobilization of three mobilizing structures of society, including workplace protest, neighbourhood protest, and associational protest.[29] The decades-long repression by the government of multiple areas of society thus systematically enabled various interest groups of such a pluralistic society to revolt together against the incumbent regime – a phenomenon that linchpin monarchies thus may be able to avoid through their tolerance and mobilization of pluralism. Additionally, looking at the case of Libya, Gaddafi's "four-decade-long effort to consolidate his power and rule by patronage to kin and clan" resulted in extreme political and social repression, coupled with the collapse legitimate political or public institutions throughout the country.[30] Although the wreckage of Libyan societal infrastructure inhibited Libyans to organize protest effectively, it was again the joint determination of civilians from all across Libya that mobilized them regardless of tribal, ethnic, or sectarian cleavages in joining the rebels under the leadership of the National Transitional Council. These examples serve to illustrate that the impact that repression of plurality, found also in Ben Ali of Tunisia, Assad of Syria, and Saleh of Yemen, will only foster tension within society and ultimately deem these presidents more vulnerable than linchpin monarchs to the tide of the civil uprising throughout Arab Spring. Hence, "the deeper and more robust the authoritarian structure, and the fewer the opportunities for legal political opposition and participation, the more likely the citizens are to rebel."[31]

Although Jordan and Morocco serve as examples of linchpin monarchies, except for the partial exception of Oman, all the Gulf monarchies are examples of dynastic monarchies and thus do not require a broad coalition for survival. Michael Herb defines dynastic monarchies as "regimes in which the ruling family monopolizes the highest state offices, controls the institutions of the state by distributing family members throughout the bureaucracy, and has developed mechanisms for settling family disputes – especially over succession".[32] Saudi Arabia and Kuwait stand as prime examples of this kind of regime. Oman does not necessarily qualify as Sultan Qabus holds all major posts, including prime minister, minister of defence, and minister of foreign affairs, in his own government and has not shared much power. However, he has given some of his relatives important state posts and therefore although not a complete dynastic monarchy, nonetheless shows most characteristics of dynastic monarchies.[33]

The dynastic characteristic of monarchies in the Gulf has helped these monarchies survive and prosper in the modern world. While military coups have historically been the main threat to monarchies in the Arab world, dynastic monarchies would be difficult to overthrow in this way because so many members of the royal family are embedded in key positions in military institutions. Succession is not just from father to son, as the royal family selects the new ruler from their own number and therefore prevents incapable rulers from taking throne. We see an example of this in the al-Saud family, where King Saud was forced to resign from the throne by the royal family itself, and was succeeded by his brother Faisal. Lastly, and perhaps most relevant to the context of the Arab Spring, families act as an informal mechanism of representation, with various members of the families talking to different groups of society.[34] As Gause puts it, "their wide presence in society provided a built-in intelligence service, keeping the families close to those they ruled. They knew what was going on and thus did not get too far ahead of, or fall too far behind, their subjects."[35] In this way, dynastic monarchies can enjoy relative immunity to the tides of social unrest and revolt, which authoritarian presidents, without such a coalition as an extensive royal family, do not maintain.

This is not to say that dynastic monarchies will refrain from promoting pluralism in their societies. However, their regime coalition rests on a narrower social base than those of linchpin monarchies, leading for a lesser degree of

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need for mobilization of political groups in managing plurality. There are a few distinct characteristics prevalent in all dynastic monarchies, which help allow them to rest on a narrower social base. The first is that all dynastic monarchies are also oil-producing rentier states. Oil not only funded the formation of the institutions of the family regimes, but also continues to enable governments to distribute oil wealth to co-opt political allies and sideline rivals. Saudi Arabia's immediate response to the events of the Arab Spring was to increase spending on benefits for citizens. This goes to show a more general trend in oil-producing states, where oil rents are used to cushion crises and buy loyalty. However, as Pete Moore states, "oil does not spend itself"[36], and as recent events in Libya have shown, a ruler such as Gaddafi's erroneous and wasteful spending of oil wealth will ultimately contribute to his demise. Another characteristic of dynastic monarchies, which contributes to their survival, is found in demographic factors. Except for Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, all Gulf monarchies have very small, mostly homogenous citizen populations. In fact, in countries like Qatar and the UAE, a vast majority of residents are not citizens. Therefore, the impact of oil rents, combined with such small citizen populations will ultimately make it easier for such states' to maintain control over their populations. Looking at the case of Saudi Arabia, hosting a much larger and more pluralistic population than its Gulf counterparts, the unique and extreme role that religion plays in legitimizing its rule, coupled with the impact of oil wealth and a wide-ranging means of tools of social control may explain its exceptionalism in this respect.

The Exogenous Factor: Regional Dynamics and the Impact of the GCC

The impact of regional security politics and regional dynamics – manifested most clearly through recent actions taken by the GCC – is a significant advantage that Arab monarchs enjoy over their autocratic president counterparts in the face of the Arab Spring. The acceptance of non-Gulf monarchies to the GCC has led for some to question its mandate – rather than an organization with mostly economic goals pertaining to oil-exporting Gulf states, it seems that the GCC has been slowly transforming itself in to a 'club of authoritarian kings'.[37] The recent expansion of membership, coupled with the apparent reassertion of Saudi leadership within the council against Qatar and the UAE, has led to real impacts of GCC membership in maintaining the resilience of Arab monarchies. There are two main reasons for Saudi Arabian urgency in initiating forceful and meaningful action in the light of the Arab Spring. Firstly, following the United State voicing concerns about human rights violations during the crackdown in Bahrain, the Saudis have apparently decided that their traditional allies cannot be trusted. The second is that real consequences of the protests within any of their member states could thus have real implications back home.[38]

The Saudi-led GCC 'counterrevolution' has attempted to prevent the potential disruptive effects of the Arab Spring on its member states through economic, military, and ideational means. Composed (with the exception of Morocco and Jordan) of oil-rich rentier states, the GCC's individual members' response to the events of the Arab Spring so far has been to increase expenditure on public services, salaries, benefits etc. in order to weather the storm and appease the people. Therefore, the GCC has promised $20 billion to aid development projects in Bahrain and Oman for the same reasons, fearing that lack of increased public spending in these states could be insufficient in the face of mass protest or civil unrest. Furthermore, by sending military support to Bahrain in the midst of one of the worst periods of violence throughout the crackdown, Saudi Arabia signaled its determination to prevent significant disruptive effects of the Arab Spring on GCC member states to GCC members as well as the rest of the world. Finally, through its actions, it appears that Saudi Arabia is contemplating the role of the GCC as replacing that of the Arab League in fostering Arab unity in this time of stress. Such a role for the GCC not only would ban the monarchies more tightly together, but also increase their domestic survivability along with popular legitimacy.[39] Although the Saudi-led GCC counterrevolution has led to real results such as in taming the situation in Bahrain, Mehran Kamrava warns that "the extent to which this strategy is likely to succeed in the long term remains to be seen."[40]

Evaluating Political Liberalization as a Survival Strategy

Throughout the past year, we have seen almost universal initiatives taken by monarchs for political liberalization in response to the events of the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia held local council elections for September 2011 and promised to allow women to vote for the elections in 2015. In the UAE, elections for a federal consultative council were held in September of 2011. The kings of both Morocco and Jordan proposed constitutional amendments. These developments leave us with two questions. Firstly, what are the benefits of political liberalization to Arab

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monarchs as a response to the Arab Spring? Second, following from this, what impacts will these initiatives have on the democratization process and regime structures of Arab monarchies?

Features of modern Arab monarchies, previously outlined, will ultimately help facilitate the success of political liberalization. In monarchies, the mobilization or tolerance of social pluralism has very different repercussions than nationalist mobilizations of various sorts in most parts of the Arab world. In a nationalist republic, while the growth of pluralism through political liberalization will necessarily challenge the state's ideology and threaten its monopoly over corporatist organizations, political liberalization in a monarchy will usually just reinforce existing social divisions.[41] When Algeria opened its political system to elections in the early 1990s, resulting in unsettling success by the FIS, the government saw this as a threat to it's monopoly on nationalist governance, blocking a second round of elections leading to a reversal of the liberalization process. Comparing this to the results of initial parliamentary elections in Jordan and Kuwait in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Islamists also succeeded in obtaining a large number of seats. However, the regimes allowed the Islamists to do so because although they were the largest group, a varied plurality of other groups ended up gaining representation as well. As elections were not for leadership of government, as they are in republics, and rather for parliamentary seats that are subsidiary to the monarch, "kings are less frightened than presidents to open political liberalization in the Middle East because the mobilization … can be accommodated under the existing political system with minimal discontinuities." Monarchs will therefore be more willing and able to agree to a 'democratic bargain' in the face of crisis.[42]

Evaluating the events of the Arab Spring, political liberalization is thus a useful survival strategy for authoritarian monarchies, as it will allow for the mobilization of existing social pluralism without the fear of a resurgence of civil society that can topple the regime.[43] That being said, as Hamid points out, so far "these regimes have been able to create the illusion of reform even as they strengthened their grip on power"[44], whereas the persistence of widespread demonstrations coupled with the demand by masses in places like Bahrain suggest that merely sporting a façade of political liberalization without legitimate prospects of democratization alone may not be enough for Arab monarchies to weather the Arab Spring.

Concluding Remarks

Monarchies are advantageous over authoritarian republics in the context of the Arab Spring in three main ways. Firstly, monarchies can generally foster legitimacy in order to strengthen their authoritarian rule through their role of modern state formation and nation building, historical, divine, or religious claims, and/or as a result of varying consequences of the nature of paradigmatic differences between republics and monarchies. Furthermore, fundamental structural differences between modern Arab monarchies and republics will enable monarchs institutional flexibility in attending to the demands of their regime coalition in a way that autocratic presidents will necessarily avoid. Finally, the recent actions of the Saudi-led GCC in promoting unity and stability throughout its member-states – now including all eight monarchies in the MENA region – suggests real implications of regional security politics in weathering the tide of the Arab spring. Aside from these factors, case-specific characteristics of some monarchies such as extensive oil resources and small, homogenous populations will also aid the pursuance of stability in these countries throughout the events of the Arab Spring.

Following from our conclusions we see that monarchies have generally resorted to increasing public spending (in the case of oil-producing monarchies) and promising political liberalization in responding to the events of the Arab Spring. Where these methods of survival are useful in the short run, it is uncertain whether these short-term means will promote security and stability in the long run. According to Abdulaziz Sager, "the economic incentives that governments have unveiled since the protests began this year will ultimately prove ineffectual".[45] Furthermore, the nature of the protests in Bahrain and Kuwait, along with Morocco and Jordan, suggests that the varying nature of the 'social contract' that has defined the relationship between these states and their people have been fundamentally altered. In this line, incremental – but real – steps taken towards establishing true constitutional monarchies throughout the Middle East is necessary for their long term survival. Along these lines, Al-Qassemi asserts that "due to the varied nature of these monarchies, such an evolution into constitutional monarchies will likely occur in three cycles. The first cycle will include Kuwait, Jordan and Morocco, the second Bahrain and Oman, and the third Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates."[46]

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In conclusion, while Arab monarchies are fundamentally better able to withstand the Arab Spring than autocratic presidents of neighbouring republics in the short run, their long run survival will be contingent on their institutional flexibility and willingness to employ their unique ideational, structural, and regional characteristics that have aided them through the tumultuous events of 2011 in adapting to a new social and political climate.

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