

The new 'disorder' of hope

Gulf Arab states are being challenged to reform their political and social orders by a population high on hope.

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Satisfying the demand for change will not be easy, but there is hope [GALLO/GETTY]

In 1935 Lieutenant-Colonel Hodgen, the British political agent for Kuwait, wrote to the British foreign office about a new and popular form of communication in Kuwait and the other Arab monarchies along the coast of the Persian Gulf: Arabic radio broadcasts emanating from Egypt. He observed that the new form of communication "is not only significant" but also "contains very great possibilities for both good and harm".

His warnings proved to be prophetic. In the 1950s, Egyptian radio broadcasts in Arabic helped to inspire young activists and military officers to challenge Arab autocratic regimes allied with the West in much the same way that social media and other new forms of mass media have done this year in the Arab world. The seemingly strong pro-Western monarchies in Egypt and Iraq fell to popular revolutions.

But the Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf region (what we know today as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) survived by making large investments in radio and television broadcasting, harnessing the support of social and tribal networks, and tapping the unique 'legitimacy' afforded by the fact that these states, along with Morocco, were the only governments in the Middle East that could claim a continuous tradition of governance predating World War I. Steadily rising revenues from oil and gas production also helped to maintain stability.

A generation later, the Arab monarchies in the Gulf survived an upsurge in Islam that led to the downfall in 1979 of

another Middle Eastern monarchy made wealthy by oil: the Shah in Iran.

The fact that the Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf weathered past political turmoil in the Middle East should give anyone writing their political obituaries pause - even as they grapple with the most serious political crises in the region since the 1950s. Shia Bahrainis have held large and sustained demonstrations against the Sunni monarchy, while strikes and unrest have flared in Kuwait and Oman. Sultan Qaboos bin Said in Oman has already removed more than 15 government ministers in 10 days, including the minister responsible for security affairs.

In Saudi Arabia tensions among the Shia in the kingdom's oil-rich Eastern province triggered stark religious and official warnings against further demonstrations. A 'day of rage' modelled on those in other Arab states earlier in the year is scheduled to take place in the kingdom on March 11 and has been promoted on Facebook. There have also been public letters demanding political reform in Saudi Arabia.

The United Arab Emirates and other Arab monarchies in the Gulf that have escaped unrest are now contemplating a large financial aid package for both Bahrain and Oman. Further complicating politics in the Gulf are the millions of expatriate workers. Their presence is an important political issue in some Gulf states, and if these workers were forced to leave the Gulf quickly, they would spark a massive humanitarian crisis that dwarfs the one currently afflicting North Africa.

However, the most daunting challenge facing the Gulf Arabs is not days of violence or foreign workers but how to properly respond to the core demand of many Gulf (and other Arab) protesters: "al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam" ("the people want to overthrow the system"). Significantly, the word 'system' does not mean a regime or even a group of leaders. Instead, it embodies the political and social orders of society.

To address this demand, monarchs in the Gulf states do not necessarily have to follow the presidents of Egypt and Tunisia into retirement. But these rulers will have to find ways to maintain their privileges while reforming or abolishing the institutions which have maintained their authority in the past. That will not be easy but there is hope.

It is worth remembering that flags are powerful symbols of governments and that millions of individuals in Libya registered their disgust with Colonel Gaddafi's regime by abandoning his green flag in favour of the red, black and green one flown by the government he toppled 41 years ago. By contrast, Shia opposition protesters in Bahrain have adopted the same red and white flag used by the Sunni monarchy, even while calling for fundamental reforms in how the monarchy operates. The commitment of Bahrainis to use the same flag bodes well for the future of even the region's seemingly most endangered monarchy.

For decades the Middle East (and the Gulf in particular) has been known as a region of political disorder. But in the future the region may be characterised by a 'new' disorder that is hopeful, democratic and, in the words of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, a place where "a large number of possible orders glitter separately".

Sean Foley is an assistant professor of history at Middle Tennessee State University in the US and a Fulbright scholar at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation in Malaysia. He specialises in the contemporary history of the Middle East and political and religious issues throughout the Muslim world and Southeast Asia. To view more of his work, visit seanfoley.org.

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