

Op-ed: The West and the Durability and Problems of Monarchies in the Arab Spring

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The regional response to the Arab Spring has alarmed a number of international observers because a variety of ugly governments are displaying their ugliest side. No civilized person condones the nature of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi's final hour, but equally no one doubts that he worked hard to earn such a fate. Likewise, in Syria and Yemen dictators are struggling to maintain power against waves of popular unrest and anger hoping to avoid the fate of their counterparts in Cairo, Tripoli, and Tunis. The Syrian regime is stronger than that in Yemen and continues to use unrelenting brutality because it can. The Yemeni president, by contrast, schemes and attempts to buy time. He kills demonstrators as well, but has no realistic chance of stamping out the rebellion by force as Damascus is attempting to do. Yet, the Arab World has monarchies as well as nonmonarchical authoritarian regimes, and it is worth considering the less violent ways in which the majority of these countries are coping with revolutionary upheaval.

Most of the monarchies are doing a more effective job of reacting to Arab Spring events because many of them are wealthy, and even the poorer ones benefit from aid provided by their wealthy royal colleagues. Through social benefits programs and public sector pay raises, the rich oil countries are either buying off their populations or attempting to give them a stake in the system depending on how you want to describe such policies. Additionally, monarchical governments, which appear reactionary to Westerners, have often emerged as the least repressive and most responsive governments in the Arab World. The most important of these states, Saudi Arabia, is sometimes seen as having an ultra-conservative government and an ultra-traditional population, which complement each other. Any large-scale dissent could alter this picture, so the Saudis retain a strong interest in maintaining a tranquil population without massive repression. This concern leads to considerable wealth distribution as well as some cosmetic gestures by Riyadh toward democracy at the local level. The Saudis and other monarchical leaders seem to know that their legitimacy is shaky in the 21st century, and they need at least the appearance of responsive government to survive. In this regard, Qadhafi stashed over \$200 billion worth of savings and investments in secret funds while allowing many of his people to wallow in poverty. The Arab kings, in contrast, usually know how to spread the money around at least to the extent of taking the steam out of dissent. In the modern era, no one overthrows a republic to establish a monarchy, and the kings, emirs, and their supporters know it.

The much poorer Jordanian kingdom has sometimes been described as a likely candidate for regime-threatening upheaval, but this case is dramatically overstated. Jordan has a responsible government with a leadership that has been able to attract vast amounts of foreign aid and investment from the United States, Europe, and the Gulf Arabs. It also maintains a parliament and allows the expression of anti-Israeli sentiment among the population, although this is permitted only within limits. Should a truly democratic government be elected in the near future, it would be under enormous public pressure to renounce the 1994 peace treaty with Israel, distance itself from the United States, and perhaps improve relations with Tehran.

Renouncing the treaty and supporting Hamas is a key plank in the leading opposition party's political agenda, and such actions would be extremely popular among Jordan's large Palestinian community. Such policies would also lead to a collapse of Western aid, and it is not clear why Saudi Arabia would bother to provide financial aid to a post-monarchical Jordan. These radical changes would probably not help the Palestinians, and Jordan would become a new Bangladesh economically. Most Jordanians are aware of these realities, even if some occasionally seek limited concessions from the government through demonstrations. Under these circumstances, Jordan's go-slow approach to democratic reform is something responsible leaders may therefore have to accept. Conversely, Morocco looked like a more likely candidate for serious upheaval in early 2011, although this danger appears to have subsided following a program of constitutional reforms and ongoing efforts by the king to outmaneuver the February 20 opposition movement.

Yet, if most monarchies are coping with Arab Spring demands with limited or no violence, there is one key exception, and that is the government in Bahrain. Reliable human rights organizations have indicated that the 2011 Bahraini crackdown on pro-democracy Shi'ite demonstrators was extensive and brutal. As anyone who has visited Bahrain knows, that country's Shi'ite majority experiences crushing, ongoing discrimination, while Shi'ite political leaders often beg for crumbs in the way of public sector jobs and anti-poverty measures for their community. The Bahraini leaders need to address the pain of its Shi'ite population before their fanciful claim of an Iranian guiding hand for the protesters actually becomes true. This means massive anti-poverty and jobs programs, as well as judicial and political reform punctuated by ongoing programs of political amnesty. Bahrain only has about one million citizens. It is time to start providing improved economic opportunities for all of them and thereby lay the groundwork for more comprehensive political participation. The richer Gulf states have promised to help in this effort and Western states need to encourage such actions to the greatest extent possible.

In this international environment, it is useful for the United States to emphasize that it would look with revulsion on a return to the old Bahraini way of doing business by disproportionately attending to the needs of only the Sunni portion of the population. It is nevertheless unwise for Washington to end its relations with this government and withdraw U.S. military forces. At this point, Bahrain has two extremely important allies—the United States and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have been extremely helpful in helping the United States fight terrorism in places like Yemen, but they led a military intervention to bolster the current Bahraini government and are certainly not trusted to advance Shi'ite rights. Any withdrawal of U.S. influence in Bahrain would lead to a void which Riyadh would fill quickly. Ceding U.S. influence in Bahrain to Saudi Arabia might make Americans feel good about their unwillingness to collaborate with repression, but it certainly does not help Bahrain's Shi'ites, since Riyadh is unlikely to object to harsh Bahraini government measures. So long as the United States can prevail on Manama to move forward on Shi'ite rights, it needs to stay engaged. If Washington reaches a dead end, then this policy may have to be reconsidered.

Finally, it needs to be noted that while the West appreciates the strengths as well as the weaknesses of monarchies, it will never support them unconditionally. The West often looks favorably on modernizing monarchies with parliaments, such as Jordan and Kuwait, while it has more reservations about absolute monarchies. This situation can create challenges in establishing a balanced policy. While the United States needs to continue pushing for women's rights, and praise even limited efforts to expand popular input to policy, it also needs to recognize that a Western-style democracy has never been the replacement regime for

a fallen monarchy in the Middle East. The 1958 ouster of a moderate monarchy in Iraq was particularly tragic in that it led to a series of authoritarian regimes culminating in the rule of Saddam Hussein. Conversely, all nondemocratic systems, including monarchies, lose Western friends when their own population rises against them and especially when they respond with violence. Without recourse to the voting booth, angry citizens receive widespread sympathy when they take to the streets to demand redress. The Gulf monarchies are reported to have been extremely upset when the United States did not provide forceful backing for Egyptian President Mubarak in the 18-day revolution that overthrew him. However, they wish to characterize this, there is no Western safety net for any nondemocratic regime in these circumstances. Ultimately, the Arab monarchies must take care of themselves through good governance and efforts to maintain the trust, and sometimes through the empowerment of their own population. Without these factors there is only the way of Mubarak and Ben Ali.

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