



Breaking Taboos: Youth Activism in the Gulf States

MARCH 2014

Shaped by a new media environment and emboldened by the early success of the Arab Awakening, activist youth are bringing new forms of civic engagement and political contestation to the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The emerging Gulf youth movements are distinctive in their comprehensive critique of the ruling system and in their dismissal of existing political leaders as incapable of delivering fundamental political reform.

Youth activists are challenging the conservative political culture and traditional social norms of these oil-exporting monarchies. In Saudi Arabia this has included criticism of the king online and even demonstrations. In Kuwait, a youth campaign of escalating street action forced the hand of parliament and prompted the resignation of a scandal-weakened prime minister. Bahrain experienced several years of youth-initiated protests, though these failed to compel political concessions from a sharply divided monarchy.

Youth movements are far from achieving their demands for greater democratic representation and government accountability in a region where political parties are banned and direct criticism of rulers brings imprisonment. But their influence cannot be assessed by a narrow focus on immediate political outcomes. The generational divide is testing not only the state but important mediators of state power: tribes and Islamist movements. Youth are struggling against the suffocating lack of space for social engagement and political innovation. And they are tapping into growing doubts about the capacity of ruling families to manage the coming challenges to the

welfare state system. In short, they are laying the groundwork for the transformations to come.

GCC Youth Mobilized before the Arab Awakening

New forms of youth activism appeared in the Gulf prior to the political upheaval of 2011. Social networks grew out of Bahraini and Omani Internet forums started over a decade ago. Kuwaiti youth championed electoral reform in 2006. And Saudi youth drove a wave of volunteerism in the wake of the 2009 Jeddah floods. These early manifestations point to two drivers of youth activism: the deterioration of the welfare state and the new information environment.

The Gulf political order was built on an implicit social contract with government promising its citizens jobs, social services, and housing. In the less wealthy states, this contract is fraying as growing populations strain the capabilities of the patrimonial system. The informal competition for public services increasingly relies on tribal, sectarian, and other communal networks within Gulf bureaucracies, hindering equity and efficiency. This nexus of failing state institutions, declining services, and identity politics is often cited by youth as a barrier to individual ambitions and national aspirations.

Youth politics in the Gulf are shaped not only by demands but also by opportunities. The Gulf's advanced communications infrastructure, far more sophisticated than elsewhere in the Middle East, permit near universal access to the Internet, including social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The GCC

countries make up 85 percent of the active Twitter users in the Arab world.¹ Saudi Arabia leads the world in both Twitter penetration and YouTube downloads per Internet users.²

Through social media, Gulf youth have found an open venue for sharing news and ideas. They debate their elders, including government officials, and challenge conventional norms.³ And they mobilize. The largest political gatherings in Gulf history—the Egyptian-inspired protests known as the Pearl uprising in Bahrain in February-March 2011, and the Dignity of the Nation marches in Kuwait in October-November 2012—were organized by anonymous appeals via Facebook and Twitter.

Challenging the State, Tribes, and Islamist Movements

The new information environment reshaping youth culture is generating a tangible generational divide in the Gulf. Today, those under twenty-five make up some 54 percent of the population in the GCC countries. The new youth culture values self-direction over control, networks over hierarchy, and transparency over secrecy. This places youth in tension not only with the state, but with important mediators of state power: tribes and Islamist movements.

In Kuwait, activist youth are refusing to participate in the tribal primaries that augment tribal power in the parliament. Omani youth enacting a “Tahrir-like” protest camp at a roundabout in Sohar ridiculed the tribal sheikhs sent by the Omani Ministry of Interior to mediate.⁴

Muslim Brotherhood youth are rebelling against the hierarchy and secrecy of their own organization, publishing their critiques in open blogs and pushing

for a greater role in internal decision-making. In Kuwait, they successfully demanded more autonomy for the Islamic Constitutional Movement, the Brotherhood’s political arm, and pulled it more firmly into the opposition camp.⁵ Defectors from the Muslim Brotherhood—still dominated by an older generation—are key animators of youth activism in Saudi Arabia and across the Gulf states. In Bahrain and in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, new political movements formed as Shia youth broke away from the dominant Shia Islamist leadership, rejecting its strategy of accommodation with the government.

Youth dissatisfaction with existing political elites is providing an opening for new, more independent leaders who can use social media to attract supporters. Non-establishment preachers such as Salman al-Awda and Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia, and the nontraditional tribal populist Musallem al-Barrak in Kuwait, have built a political base outside of the conventional power centers by courting youth. Illegal rights-based organizations such as the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) are also gaining popularity.

Struggle to Create Social and Political Breathing Space in the Gulf

Youth activists in the Gulf face formidable barriers to activism. Political parties are banned throughout the Gulf. States use security forces to crack down on protests and jail vocal dissenters. Gulf states also hold considerable economic leverage over their citizens. The threat of dismissal from public sector jobs and even loss of citizenship deters many potential activists.

Societal norms also dictate against many forms of public protest. Religious authorities in Saudi Arabia and many Salafi movements denounce demonstrations as un-Islamic, on the grounds that they promote fitna or social division.⁶ The more traditional form of dissent is the petition, which maintains the semblance of national unity and of royal deference. Directly challenging the ruling family is taboo and acts of *lèse-majesté*, or insulting

1 Dubai School of Government, “Transforming Education in the Arab World: Breaking Barriers in the Age of Social Learning,” *Arab Social Media Report* 5th edition, June 2013, http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/UserManagement/PDF/ASMR_5_Report_Final.pdf.

2 Copper Smith, “The Top Twitter Markets in the World,” *Business Insider*, November 7, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-top-twitter-markets-in-the-world-2013-11>.

3 Jane Kinninmont, “To What Extent Is Twitter Changing Gulf Societies?” Chatham House, February 2013, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/0213kinninmont.pdf>; Marc Lynch, “After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State,” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 9, no. 2, June 2011, pp. 301-310.

4 Marc Valeri, “Qaboos Can Make Mistakes Like Anybody Else—the Sultan of Oman Desacralized,” *Jadaliyya* Forum, November 18, 2012, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8430/%E2%80%9Cqaboos-can-make-mistakes-like-anybody-else_-the-s.

5 Kristin Smith Diwan, “The Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Spring: Kuwait,” paper presented at The Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Spring, IISS-Dartmouth, September 9-10, 2013.

6 “Saudi clerics condemn protests and ‘deviant’ ideas,” Reuters, March 6, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/06/bc-saudi-protests-clerics-idAFLDE7250KW20110306>.

the dignity of the sovereign, are a criminal offense in Gulf legal codes.

Given these challenges, many youth activists see changing the political culture, including normalizing the right to protest, as a prerequisite to achieving fundamental political change. They are pushing against red lines and introducing innovative ways to organize and express dissent. In response, Gulf governments are retaliating with new restrictions on assembly and political expression.

The level of political contestation and the vitality of youth activism vary across the Gulf. The United Arab Emirates and Qatar, the Gulf's wealthiest states per capita, saw little oppositional political mobilization by youth. Kuwait and Bahrain, the states with parliamentary politics and a history of civil society activism, produced the most vigorous youth movements. Saudi Arabia and Oman face greater economic challenges than the former two states, have more limited room for civic organization, and fall somewhere between in terms of the extent of youth activism.

Saudi Arabia: Challenging Taboos

One surveying the dramatic change across the Arab world might be forgiven for bypassing Saudi Arabia, which has emerged as a relative island of stability. Although the Kingdom witnessed no Tahrir-style moment to threaten the monarchy, youth-led demonstrations by Shia in the Eastern Province drew thousands into the street.⁷ And it is experiencing what may be an even more subversive revolution in cyberspace.

The impact of social media on the Kingdom is so big because the existing public sphere is so small. There is little entertainment outside of shopping malls patrolled by religious police. Applications to form an organization from the Ministry of Social Affairs or to hold a gathering from the Ministry of Interior are rarely approved. All public protests are banned. Almost by default, public-minded youth are funneled into religious activities run by Islamist networks, which operate in semi-secrecy.

⁷ Toby Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?': The Shia Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011-2012," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 66, no. 4, Autumn 2012, pp. 628-659. The majority of Saudi Arabia's Shia population—estimated to be 10-15 percent of the total population—resides in the Eastern Province. Shia face many forms of state discrimination and historically have been a key source of opposition to the Saudi government.

Faced with this forbidding social environment, Saudi youth are taking to social media in droves.⁸ Some are using them to develop new modes of personal expression and social connection. Others are using them to initiate a new political conversation.

Both expressions are significant developments, with the potential to generate greater demands for political participation and government accountability. And both are evident in Saudi Twitter campaigns. In the early days of the Arab Awakening in 2011 the hashtag "#Tal3mrak," an honorific showing respect for royalty or important individuals, emerged as a rare venue for publicly criticizing the Saudi King. In July 2013 the hashtag "the wage doesn't meet the need" garnered over a million tweets a day, as Saudis engaged in an unprecedented critique of government spending priorities. The popularity of the youth-produced YouTube comedy shows that take a satirical look at news and social affairs likewise speak to the Saudi thirst for honest commentary.⁹

Social media is not only loosening existing taboos but is also breaking down social barriers. Saudi youth are translating virtual connections into gatherings that unite people across class, sect, and geography. But once these manifestations cross the line into political activism, even the hint of it, they invite scrutiny not only from the government but also by religious authorities and Islamist networks jealously guarding their hold over youth association.¹⁰

Youth volunteer organizations, originally brought together via social media to respond to the Jeddah floods of 2009, faced opposition by Islamist networks when they attempted to run a candidate

⁸ Caryle Murphy, *A Kingdom's Future: Saudi Arabia through the Eyes of its Twentysomethings* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2013), <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kingdoms-future-saudi-arabia-through-the-eyes-its-twentysomethings>.

⁹ Simon Owens, "Saudi Satire Ignites YouTube's Massive Growth in the Middle East," *US News & World Report*, May 30, 2012, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/05/30/saudi-satire-ignites-youtubes-massive-growth-in-middle-east>.

¹⁰ Kristin Smith Diwan, "Youthful Saudi Reformers Only Safe in the Twittersphere," *MENASource* (blog), Atlantic Council, December 20, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/youthful-saudi-reformers-only-safe-in-the-twittersphere>.

for the municipal council in 2011.¹¹ The government rejected their candidate. In 2010-11 a transnational youth network created by Saudis from an Islamist background convened an annual meeting of more than a hundred young men and women from across the Gulf to discuss issues of Islamic reform and civil society development. The third meeting held in Kuwait drew the censure of a transnational alliance of conservative Salafi Islamist groups and closure by the government.

Other youthful reformers still confer through Twitter and webzines. These ideological communities of Islamist reformers and neo-Arab nationalists are having an impact on intellectual developments within the Kingdom, but their direct political impact is marginal. Sharp disagreements over the Syria conflict are also hindering their initially promising steps at forging cross-sectarian coalitions among Sunni and Shia activists.

These tentative steps toward greater political expression and freer civic association appear under direct threat after the Saudi cabinet approved a new antiterrorism law in December 2013. Its sweeping definition of terrorism as any act that destabilizes public order or harms national unity would seem to cover just about any type of dissent. Within days, Saudis took to Twitter to criticize the new law, under the crypto-ironic hashtag “In Mozambique.”

Kuwait: toward a Constitutional Monarchy

Kuwait offers a strong contrast to Saudi Arabia and a more promising environment for youth activism. Kuwait boasts a vigorous civil society with social institutions to support informal gatherings and public debate. Political societies are represented in a parliament backed by a respected constitution that grants the legislature important means of enforcing a degree of accountability on the ruling-family led executive.¹² Youth activists are working to deepen this democratic foundation.

¹¹ Heavy rains in the Red Sea city of Jeddah in November 2009 resulted in floods that caused over a hundred deaths. This generated unprecedented criticism of the government for its inadequate infrastructure and response and an unusual outpouring of charity and volunteerism from Jeddah residents conditioned to rely upon the state.

¹² In lieu of political parties, the Kuwait and Bahrain governments license (or allow) political societies, which recruit members and informally run in elections. Without party lists these political societies tend to be weak. Thus independents play an oversized role in Gulf parliaments, hindering the coalition building needed to impose accountability on the ruling-family led executive.

Youth politics are nurtured in Kuwait’s well-funded university student governments. And unlike the other Gulf countries, independent youth movements have a record of success upon which to build. In 2006 a mostly urban youth movement organized through Internet chat rooms—known as the “Orange Movement”—successfully pressured parliament, and through it the royal family, to decrease the number of voting districts in an attempt to make parliamentary elections less amenable to manipulation by tribes and the government.

In another unprecedent move, a revived youth movement successfully forced the ouster of Kuwait’s standing Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Sabah in 2011 following a corruption scandal, over the initial hesitations of the parliament and objections of the Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah. The lead-up to the premier’s resignation was notable for the escalation of street tactics used by the youth-led opposition, noticeably more tribal and Islamist than in 2006, to pressure the parliamentarians to join their campaign. Marches and sit-ins in front of the parliament culminated in the actual storming of the parliament in November 2011. Parliamentary elections held the following February in the wake of the government’s resignation rewarded the leading factions in the protests and returned the most oppositional parliament in Kuwait’s history, including two members (MPs) elected from the youth movement.

Kuwait’s youth movement marked another step forward in 2012 with the formation of the GCC’s first independent youth political society: the Civil Democratic Movement (CDM). Though fewer than one hundred active members, the CDM set a precedent by holding open elections for its leadership and articulating a concrete political agenda, including the first formal calls in Kuwait for an elected government.¹³ The CDM, working with other independent youth activists, pressed opposition MPs to make these democratic reforms part of their platform.¹⁴

¹³ In Kuwait, the prime minister is by tradition from the ruling family and is appointed by the emir. The CDM is calling for the prime minister to be chosen in direct elections.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Dickinson, “Youth Movement Helps to Set Kuwait’s Political Agenda,” *National*, July 22, 2012, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/youth-movement-helps-to-set-kuwait-s-political-agenda>.

The success of the youth movement in elevating its political demands to parliamentarians forced Kuwait's emir to take extraordinary actions. After the constitutional court dissolved the parliament on a technicality, the emir unilaterally changed the electoral law, drawing an opposition election boycott.¹⁵ Security forces also forced protests out of Kuwait's city center where the Dignity of the Nation march, the largest in Kuwait's history, drew tens of thousands demanding the emir rescind the new electoral law and chanting "we will not let you."¹⁶

However, as protests retreated into Kuwait's more tribal neighborhoods, their national appeal diminished. The public's tolerance for street protests also declined, as the unrest in Egypt tarnished the appeal of revolutionary change, and the carnage in Syria highlighted the dangers of national disunity.

With the opposition on its heels, the government sought to press its advantage in the courts, in a determined campaign to reestablish red lines through prosecution. Throughout 2012-13 reports of protests were replaced by dockets of court hearings as dozens of activists and former politicians faced charges for their street actions or for the now common charge of offending the emir.¹⁷ Several received multi-year prison sentences. Kuwait, once the Gulf state most celebrated for its freedom of expression, has become a leading Gulf state prosecuting individuals for tweets.

Bahrain: Standard-bearers for the Revolution
Bahrain stands out in the Gulf for the scale of unrest it experienced during the wave of uprisings that rippled across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. Independent youth activists, and later a clandestine collective known as the February 14 Youth Coalition, played the leading role in initiating a massive, unprecedented political uprising that continues even today. Although their impact is undeniable, their activism has

¹⁵ Before the change, Kuwaitis could select four candidates for parliament, which facilitated coalition-building. The emir decreased the vote to one.

¹⁶ The expression "we will not let you" was drawn from a speech given by a former opposition parliamentarian, Musallem al-Barak, who broke every taboo against challenging the emir in a provocative public speech, stating "We will not allow you, your highness, to take Kuwait into the abyss of autocracy..."

¹⁷ The inviolability of the emir is set in Kuwait's constitution and the penal code prescribes imprisonment for anyone who publicly "objects to the rights and authorities of the emir or faults him." Human Rights Watch, "Kuwait: Drop Charges for 'Offending Emir,'" April 15, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/15/kuwait-drop-charges-offending-emir>.

not achieved the constitutional monarchy many originally sought, nor the fall of the monarchy many in the Shia opposition now demand.¹⁸ Three years after the initial protests, Bahrain is a divided society: riven by sectarianism, ruled by a divided monarchy, and dependent on Saudi Arabia for political and economic survival.

When the demonstrations began, there was reason to believe that political reform in Bahrain was feasible. In 2001 Bahrain's new King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa promulgated a comprehensive reform program to address grievances about corruption, state discrimination, and the lack of development in villages and that have fueled Bahrain's chronic cycle of unrest. Bahrain's opposition political societies, including leftist-nationalists and the broad Shia Islamist coalition known as al-Wefaq, chose to go along with King Hamad's initiative by agreeing to participate in the newly reinstated parliament, despite reservations about gerrymandered districts and the imposition of an unelected upper house.¹⁹

Youth activism arose alongside skepticism of this reform effort, building upon the establishment of the popular pro-democracy forum Bahrain Online in 1999. As the legal opposition failed in its efforts to audit the state or reign in the rampant corruption of the ruling family, young Shia activists turned against the cleric-led al-Wefaq. Impatient youth gravitated toward the boycott wing of the opposition with its rights-based language and use of civil disobedience.

They were ready when an anonymous Facebook posting called for demonstrations on February 14, 2011, only three days after Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak was forced from power. Over 100,000 people responded, eventually establishing a sprawling protest camp at a traffic circle known as the Pearl Roundabout. As state violence and insinuations of Iranian complicity polarized the public, the opposition political societies and the reformist Crown Prince tried to hash out a political compromise. Their work was cut short by the entry of Saudi troops, which empowered security-minded

¹⁸ Bahrain is the only GCC state with a majority Shia population. Shias also make up the majority of the opposition to the Sunni royal family.

¹⁹ The opposition societies boycotted the initial elections in 2002 but chose to contest the elections for parliament four years later. Al-Wefaq swept all of the seats they contested but fell short of gaining a majority in the parliament due to the gerrymandering of districts.

hardliners within the Bahraini ruling family. Security forces drove protesters from the circle and a state of emergency was declared.

The securitization of the struggle increased its sectarian nature and undermined the possibility of a political solution. While the legal opposition continued to participate in formal dialogues, now from outside the parliament, many youth activists vowed to continue the revolution through the directives of the February 14 Youth Coalition.

This clandestine umbrella organization was likely formed from amongst participants in the initial uprising at the Pearl Roundabout itself.²⁰ The coalition's Pearl Charter clearly states its aim: to liberate Bahrain from Saudi occupation and to overthrow the illegitimate al-Khalifa-led government and replace it with a new order based on self-determination.²¹

The February 14 Youth Coalition is showing great creativity in its use of social media to direct acts of civil disobedience and ingenuity in mounting demonstrations despite repression. The group is proud of the protest culture it helped take root over the past three years. But although government security measures failed to end the coalition's resistance campaigns, the government succeeded in effectively containing them. In 2012 the government banned all protests in the capital city and formed security cordons around Shia villages, which then created separate village youth councils. In these intimate confines violence escalated, and Shia resistance symbolism increased.

In the fall of 2013 the Bahrain government upped its campaign against the February 14 Youth Coalition associating them with acts of terrorism and trying fifty individuals of establishing and maintaining the network.²² Amendments to Bahrain's antiterrorism law passed by the parliament in 2013 increased the punitive measures regulating freedom of expression and assembly.

²⁰ Toby C. Jones and Ala'a Shehabi, "Bahrain's Revolutionaries," *Middle East Channel* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, January 2, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/02/bahrains_revolutionaries.

²¹ The February 14 Youth Coalition, *Pearl Charter*, <http://www.14f2011.com/sites/default/files/MethaqEN.pdf>.

²² Human Rights Watch, "Bahrain Parliament Moves to Curtail Basic Rights," August 1, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/31/bahrain-parliament-moves-curtail-basic-rights>; Kristin Smith Diwan, "Bahrain in Egypt's Shadow," *MENASource* (blog), Atlantic Council, September 27, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/bahrain-in-egypt-s-shadow>.

Today, the potential for creating a national platform capable of winning Sunnis to the coalition's cause is exceedingly diminished. The polarization of the Bahraini public has produced online activists attacking the Shia opposition, defending the government, as well as smaller groups looking to find a political alternative to the current impasse.²³

Still the decentralized youth networks persist in their media and communal resistance campaigns and nightly confrontations between security forces and youth burning tires and launching Molotov cocktails continue. The government's one-sided security approach to political demands risks radicalizing a generation of Shia Bahraini youth and the broader Shia community.

Conclusion

Gulf governments spent the last eighteen months formalizing new controls on assembly and political expression to counter the political threat of youth activism. They continue to be aided by the weakness of national political coalitions able to carry youth demands, and by the political turmoil and economic difficulties in the transitioning states of the Arab Awakening, which severely eroded the popular appetite for change in the Gulf. As a result, youth activists are receding in influence.

Still the deeper challenges of social change and political adaptation remain unanswered. Although youth political movements suffered a setback under the onslaught of government pressure, the political implications of generational change will continue to grow. Already Gulf states are replacing the Arab Awakening's preemptive increase in public spending with subsidy cuts. As an aging Gulf leadership faces mounting fiscal challenges along with its own fraught generational transition, youth may yet play a leading role in forcing the change these monarchies now avoid.

²³ Following the Pearl uprising Bahrain's Sunni community produced youth movements critical of the government, either for not being sufficiently tough on the Shia opposition or for failing to meet the economic interests of the Sunni community. See, for example, the manifesto of the Fateh Youth Coalition, June 30, 2013, <http://alfateh21february.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/fycmanifesto.pdf>.

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