

## **A democracy gulf in the Gulf**

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In a year of dramatic change in the Middle East, in which the desire for revolutionary political change is still being expressed in several Arab countries, it is educational to see that, away in the east of the Arab world, the Gulf states are addressing this phenomenon in the traditional Gulf way - with activity masquerading as progress.

This month, elections will be held in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Their conduct says much about the way Gulf rulers are approaching the issue of popular participation in government.

Supporters of the slow pace of reform argue that Gulf Arabs need to be introduced gradually to the concept of democratic norms. Shock treatment would tear apart the fabric of traditional leadership that the various kingdoms, emirates and sultanates have relied on for generations. Universal suffrage and legislative authority will eventually emerge from the structures now being put in place.

Critics say there is no real acceptance of free speech on the part of the leadership, let alone any willingness to cede legislative authority.

In the UAE, voters themselves were selected by each emir, based on completely opaque criteria, so that only 129,000 Emiratis (about 12 per cent of the population) will take part on the day. Given that voters can only elect 20 of the 40 members of the Federal National Council (the other 20 are appointed) and that the FNC itself has no designated powers, one can be forgiven for asking exactly what all the fuss is about.

Still, at the first FNC election in 2006, less than 7,000 Emiratis were allowed to vote, so one could argue, in the words beloved of politicians and sporting coaches, that the UAE is achieving "forward momentum".

In Saudi Arabia, half the members of municipal councils (with a purely advisory role) will be elected, with the other half appointed. Only men will be allowed to participate as either voters or candidates. Originally scheduled for 2009, the elections were postponed for two years and it is not drawing too long a bow to suggest that their rescheduling has just a bit to do with providing a political release valve in view of the region's recent unrest. If the previous election was anything to go by, it is likely that the voting rules will favour religiously conservative candidates once again.

Bahrain's election is actually a by-election and won't do too much for cross-sectarian political harmony. It has been scheduled as a result of the resignation of the 18 parliamentary members of the Shi'a opposition al-Wifaq bloc over the Sunni government's crackdown on the largely Shi'a popular opposition movement earlier this year. Al-Wifaq had also withdrawn from the ineffectual 'national dialogue' set up in the wake of the crackdown, and has declined to run candidates in the by-election for its 18 vacated seats.

Given that four candidates have already been elected unopposed, only 14 seats will be contested. In a political system that the Foundation for Democratic Advancement scored 0 per cent for electoral fairness, it is little wonder that the main sectarian opposition has both resigned and boycotted the election.

In a contest for regional leadership, the Gulf states are showing an unwillingness to adapt to the new possibilities the Arab Spring is opening up. Turkey is expanding its influence not through financial support, as is the Gulf way, but through its example of an independent and economically successful democratic Islamism that is attractive to many more people than the autocratic Islamism of the Gulf.

We can only hope that future elections in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya will advance democratic norms in the Arab world in a meaningful way, because those in the Gulf states this month certainly don't fill that criteria.

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