

Choice between kings and countries

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A diplomatic spat between Egypt and Saudi Arabia last week has brought into focus differences between the Arab heavyweights that may well prove to be the precursor to a future Middle East in which the West must decide whether to support the traditional monarchies or the governments in post-autocratic Arab states. The incident was the arrest of Egyptian lawyer Ahmed al-Gizawi by Saudi authorities for allegedly bringing 20,000 Xanax tablets into the kingdom. This action brought protests and anti-Saudi graffiti in Egypt and the withdrawal of the Saudi ambassador from Cairo. The fact that Gizawi had filed a lawsuit against the Saudi government over poor treatment of Egyptian guest workers, and was subsequently sentenced in absentia by Saudi authorities to one year in prison and 20 lashes for defaming the king, laid Riyadh open to accusations that the drug charges were false and malicious. Such public disagreements would not have occurred in Hosni Mubarak's Egypt.

This is just the most recent in a series of incidents that has increasingly pitted the Arab monarchies against the rest of the Arab world. When the post of secretary-general of the Arab League became vacant last year, Qatar nominated a member of its ruling family even though the post had traditionally been given to an Egyptian. The Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil al-Arabi eventually won out.

In March, Kuwait was the only Gulf nation that sent its head of state to the Arab League meeting in Baghdad as suspicion of Iraqi relations with Tehran continued to irritate the Gulf states.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been vociferous supporters of arming Syrian insurgents without regard to the second- and third-order effects of such a move that have stopped other states from advocating this course.

The United Arab Emirates has been accused of expelling Lebanese nationals from Dubai and has endured criticism from exiled Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi for the expulsion of Syrian protesters earlier this year.

The fear is that if such incidents continue, what are now relatively low-level disagreements could build up to the point where the Arab world is split, with Sunni monarchies on the one side and post-autocratic, semi-democratic states on the other. There are already indications that such a restructure is occurring. Invitations issued to Jordan and Morocco last year to join the Gulf Co-operation Council indicated the degree to which Saudi Arabia is keen to gather what it considers to be "like-minded" Sunni monarchies within a Gulf-centric monarchical coalition.

At the same time, the rest of the Arab world grapples with political reform that is changing the way in which some of these states are governed. Such has been the desire of Riyadh to ensure unity of the monarchies that oppose substantial political reform, that there has been increasing public talk of a union between Saudi Arabia and its troubled eastern neighbour Bahrain. While this is likely only an exercise in public messaging at this stage, such talk of a political union would not have been necessary before the Arab Spring made Riyadh nervous at the way in which Bahrain has handled its internal problems.

This coalition of Arab monarchies is designed to maintain the unity of proponents of a political system that is disinclined to allow the type of political reforms that other members of the Arab world are having imposed on them through popular uprisings. This is good for those who see political stability and certainty as the essential elements in maintaining reliable global energy supplies.

The constant, much-hyped threat of Iranian expansionist aims in the region serves as further justification for those who support the Gulf states' desire to present itself as a unified, and unreconstructed, monarchist bloc.

But such moves present diplomatic and security challenges for Gulf states' alliance partners in the West, including Australia.

Until the start of the Arab Spring, Arab states were nearly exclusively variations of autocratic rule. In dealing with the Arab world, realpolitik trumped principle largely because there was little choice; one could choose between benevolent autocratic rule or repressive autocratic rule. But if the Arab world becomes split between the monarchies on whom the West relies for energy supplies and bases to check Iranian ambitions on the one hand, and emerging Arab democracies that may not share the monarchies' views of the world on the other, the West may well need to decide between principle and pragmatism in a real way in its dealings with the region.

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