

Why Arab kings may outlast the dictators

28 | Fevereiro | 2011

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[Daily Star](#), 28|Fevereiro|2011

As far-fetched as it may have seemed a few weeks ago, the possibility of Arab autocracies falling like dominoes is now real. Tunisia’s revolution could have been dismissed as an aberration, but President Hosni Mubarak’s fall in Egypt is shaking the Middle East and Moammar Gadhafi’s turn may be next. Yet not all regimes are beyond repair. Some may be able to weather the current storm through reform.

Surprising as the idea may seem, it is some of the region’s monarchies that have created a more liberal environment for their citizens, and which, therefore, stand a better chance of avoiding full-fledged revolution. King Abdullah II of Jordan and King Mohammed VI of Morocco enjoy a degree of traditional or religious legitimacy that the republican autocrats of Egypt and Tunisia never have. As a result, it seems the monarchs have felt less need to repress political pluralism.

A king can also stand above the political fray, at least in theory. He is not aligned to specific political parties or ideologies, and if trouble looms he can blame and dismiss the government. Along with the emir of Kuwait, the Moroccan and Jordanian kings rule over countries more liberal than the republics, making them more adaptable to democratic pressures.

So far Morocco has been relatively calm. A rarity in the region, its last elections were credible overall. The kingdom’s problem is that interest and participation in the electoral process is low, reflecting the fact that Parliament is weak and King Mohammed calls the shots. As a result, Moroccans believe their vote will make little difference. However, the political system is not beyond reform. Under duress, the king could re-negotiate the Constitution to modify his role and that of Parliament in order to achieve a more democratic balance between the two.

As well as holding credible elections, Kuwait has by far the most powerful Parliament in a Gulf region replete with rubber-stamp legislatures. Parliament not only interrogates the government, but even on occasion passes legislation against the emir’s express wishes. Nevertheless, Kuwait is really only a half-democracy as the emir can still appoint the government without the need for parliamentary consent. Yet if pressure were to rise the country could undergo democratic changes that would leave it resembling a constitutional monarchy.

Jordanians enjoy more political liberties than their neighbors, but their say in politics is also limited. The Parliament is toothless and elections are skewed in favor of the rural electorate, King Abdullah’s backbone of support. Genuine reforms are needed that would lead to credible elections for a much-strengthened Parliament. The king is under pressure now, but if he can cast himself as the motor of reform while accepting a lesser role for himself, the monarchy could survive.

With less to show in terms of democratization, the other monarchies in the Gulf will find adaption more difficult. Saudi Arabia is the least democratic, not even having an elected Parliament. On the other hand Gulf monarchs enjoy some traditional legitimacy. They also have huge oil incomes to distribute and may therefore avoid the combustible mix of economic grievances and political frustration that fueled the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt. Bahrain is something of an exception in this regard. A Sunni king rules over a 70 percent Shiite majority, so that the question of political participation coincides with sectarian divisions, making it a more divisive environment and prone to conflict.

Reform looks like much less of an option for Arab republics led by long-standing leaders who have heavily restricted, or abolished, democratic freedoms. Libya's Gadhafi seized power in 1969; Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen has held power since 1978; Sudan's Omar al-Bashir has been around since 1989; Abdul Aziz Bouteflika has led Algeria since 1999; and Syria's Bashar al-Assad inherited power from his father in 2000. None of them is likely to survive politically in the event of a serious revolt.

While kings do not pretend to have electoral legitimacy, autocratic presidents humiliate their people with elections that are manipulated to create a fiction of overwhelming popularity. As heads of ruling parties, they cannot stand above the political fray and shirk responsibility for their countries' political or economic crises. Mubarak fired his Cabinet, yet this did not placate demonstrators as the president was at the center of the system, not above it. Protesters in the Arab republics are unlikely to settle for anything less than new leaders, as well as a complete overhaul of their political systems.

Being more liberal has not spared governments from protests. The more open Arab countries have also seen unrest. In Jordan, protests have taken place almost daily, while Syria is eerily calm. Yet Jordanians are not angrier than Syrians, who live in a dictatorship bearing all the hallmarks of the regional malaise and ranking lower than most other Arab states with respect to a number of socio-economic indicators. Jordanians simply have fewer reasons to be afraid of taking to the streets, while Syrians face arrest and torture if they do so. A country like Jordan may absorb the pressures through adjustment, but a system as rigid and closed as Syria either survives or collapses in a cataclysm.

This truth is now being played out tragically in Libya, with a regime so repressive and brutal that there is little choice left to the protesters: either they must overthrow Gadhafi or die.

It seems impossible that the democratic genie in the Middle East can be put back in the bottle, which the Tunisians opened and Egyptians all but shattered. The era of long-lasting Arab presidents is drawing to a close. The dominoes have started falling and many other are swaying. Only the more liberal regimes, most of which happen to be monarchies, stand a chance of survival through reform.