

The Civil Society Movement in the Arab Gulf States October 20 2010

Written by Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi

Monday, 10 January 2011 13:19 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 June 2011 14:30

[Written before the recent political unrest in Bahrain, this article was originally published at the [Huffington Post](#) (with a great number of links) and in Arabic at [Aafaq Al-Mustaqbal](#).]

At first glance it seems as though the six Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies have no civil society movements to speak of, but scratching the surface unveils a complex layer of organisations that exist side by side with the governments and in some cases have been merged into governmental structures. In fact because of the relative young age of these states many of those who were active against the British presence in the Gulf prior to independence became themselves government officials and can be found in government circles until today.

Needless to say the two Gulf countries with the longest history of civil society movements are Kuwait and Bahrain where according to Dr Munira A Fakhro civil society movements have started in 1919 and 1921 respectively. However that is not to discount the fact that in some countries there was an active civil society movement in some parts earlier than in others depending on levels of education such as in the Hejaz in Saudi Arabia as well as in some parts of the UAE.

In Kuwait, the social phenomenon of dewaniyas is a unique model for civil society. The Kuwaiti dewaniya differs from the rest of the majlises or men's reception areas in Gulf in the sense that is more institutionalized where entire families contribute financially to its upkeep and tribal leaders can receive guests and visit with others. The significance of the dewaniyas in Kuwaiti society was evident when during his visit to Kuwait in 2007 the Saudi Crown Prince Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz called upon a number of dewaniyas including those of Al Shaya, Al Marzoog, Abdul Aziz Al Babtain and Mubarak Al Hasawi, leading Kuwaiti businessmen. It is not customary for Gulf leaders to casually visit the majlises of tribal leaders in each others countries, the custom would often dictate that they are visited at their place of residence but thus is the power of the dewaniya in Kuwait, its institutionalisation has cemented its importance. These majlises have even played the part of breeding grounds or incubators for political movements, ideas and civil society causes.

In the Arab Gulf states it is only Kuwait and Bahrain that have politically active parliaments although political parties can be formed only in the latter. On February 14th 2002 a new constitution was adopted in the Kingdom of Bahrain in which Article 27 guaranteed the

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“freedom to form associations and unions on national principles”. Based on that article the Bahraini parliament today includes 14 blocs or associations although they are not referred to as parties. These include both Shia and Sunni Islamic parties, communists, liberals, Arab nationalists and blocs that are backed by Bahraini businessmen.

Bahrain enjoyed freedom to form political parties earlier than any other country in the GCC up until the Bahraini parliament was dissolved in 1976. After decades of clandestine operations the civil society parties in Bahrain could finally be elected. In fact in 2005 on the golden jubilee of the founding of the Marxist-Leninist National Liberation Front of Bahrain, a deputy minister represented the government in the celebrations. Based on the precedent of Bahrain one can assume that the current social and civil society movements in Kuwait and perhaps in some other Gulf states will form into political parties once they are sanctioned by the governments.

Today, the rise of Islamic movements in the Gulf has greatly hampered the work of civil society associations. Most Gulf governments are weary of civil society movements and fear they may be either affiliated with external elements or have Islamic tendencies. It is not uncommon to hear of arrests in some GCC countries of unnamed individuals who may later receive pardons by the ruler. For instance in Oman in 2005, 31 university professors and Islamic scholars were arrested and sentenced to jail terms of up to 20 years for “setting up an illegal organisation, raising funds and recruiting members”, essentially starting a civil society movement. Their charges of aiming to overthrow the government appeared to be increasingly unlikely since they were pardoned the following month.

In most Gulf countries civil society organizations are set up by the government, for instance Oman established in August 2008, Tawasul to be the “first national independent and professional not-for-profit think tank in Oman, serving locally with international standards”. Tawasul’s mission is to “empower” civil society institutions through training and knowledge. They have conducted regular public speaking initiatives, media and networking workshops. However, Tawasul has also been involved in human rights discussions in which it had invited European experts as well as several other civil society groups in the Sultanate including the Omani Journalist Association, Children First Association and the Omani Lawyers Association a practice which is uncommon for a Gulf state backed NGO.

An interesting development in Bahrain is the pragmatic nature in which the official sanctioned parties have started so called offshoot movements that are managed by young members of the association. For instance, Al Wefaq, the largest religious and political society in Bahrain, which controls 17 members in the 40-seat lower chamber of the bicameral parliament, established the Bahrain Youth Center that is headed by Habib Marzooq. In an interview with The National Mr

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Mazrooq highlighted the importance of social networking sites including Facebook and Twitter to attract young voters to the party. The Marxists Bahraini Progressive Democratic Tribune, also known as Al Minbar, also founded the Al Shabeeba Society or Youth Society headed by Isa Al Dirazi to attract young voters.

Perhaps one of the best examples of pure grass-root civil society movements in the island Kingdom is the Bahrain Dialogue Society or Hewar that is founded and run by 30-year-old Sayed Adnan Jalal. Hewar, a non-governmental youth-oriented organisation that promotes democracy and the need for dialogue, aims is to advance youth topics in parliament as well as to lower the voting age from 20 to 19. Hewar has founded a Democracy Club that attracts youth by holding workshops and photography competitions but most impressive of all is Hewar's virtual triumph, its founder has managed to attract 6,000 out of a total of 150,000 Facebook users in Bahrain on to their page.

Kuwait has also seen a triumph for social activism when Rula Dashti, a long time campaigner for women's rights, gender equality and increasing roles for women in public life along with a group of other Kuwaiti women were able to effect a major shift in Kuwaiti politics when women won the right to vote in 2005. Four years later Ms Rula and three other Kuwaiti activists, Aseel al-Awadhi, Salwa al-Jassar and Masouma al-Mubarak were elected to the Kuwaiti parliament for the first time in history ousting a number of Islamic parties members. However, Kuwait was earlier this year embroiled in the case of two civil society activists including Khalid Al Fadhala, the secretary-general of the liberal National Democratic Alliance, who was sentenced to six months in jail for accusing the prime minister of money laundering at a public rally before being released by an appeals court.

Although the UAE does indeed have an active civil society it is mostly concentrated in altruistic and environmental endeavours or those that enjoy government patronage. Examples are the Young Arab Leaders organisation in the UAE which in the interest of full disclosure I am personally involved in and the Emirates Environmental Group amongst others. Abu Dhabi has launched an awards ceremony for active civil society leaders which honoured Emirati, Gulf and expatriate leaders and initiatives that offer assistance to the community.

I have argued in two articles in The National and [The Guardian](#) that a failure to develop civil society in the UAE and in Qatar in non-charitable initiatives, commendable as they are into areas such as human rights and democracy may be due to a continuous stride for capitalism in society. The UAE and Qatari media, along with the favourable existing commercial environment have also contributed to a feeling of apathy in the generations that were born in the post independence era of the 1970's.

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Although both nations have held elections, Qatar first in 1999 and the UAE in 2006 for the municipal council and parliament respectively the elected bodies have largely been powerless to initiate reform and are not looked upon by members of the society as influential institutions. Qatar was the first country in the Gulf to give women the right to vote in 1999 although none of the six female candidates were elected. Moza Al Maliki, a psychotherapist, writer and university professor who was amongst the female candidates expressed her disappointment at the elections results but still continues to lobby for women's rights. Ms Moza, according to ABC was also amongst the first women in Qatar to drive by herself, and to take off the abaya. She is also said to have challenged her students not to cover their faces in her classroom.

In Saudi Arabia a significant number of civil societies are based in Jeddah, traditionally a more open and tolerant community than the capital Riyadh. Others such as the Saudi Debate Society and RAISE have taken the virtual route and used Facebook to communicate with its members and sympathisers. Amongst the famous civil society activists in Saudi Arabia is Wajeha Al Huwaidar, the co-founder of The Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia. Other activists both secular and religious have found themselves in detention or sentenced to prison terms and forced to sign a statement agreeing to cease all forms of activism before being released.

Because a large number of the civil society movements heads are appointed by the governments in the Gulf they cannot be classified as grassroots movements.

There is still a long way to go before the Gulf monarchies have fully developed civil societies. Even in Kuwait, the most democratically inclined society in the Gulf, the boundaries of civil society are still being defined as the recent al Fadhala case illustrates. Only when there is a truly free press will there be a true civil society movement. On the other hand, independent civil activism also needs to be accepted socially in the Gulf before being recognised officially by the government.

Perhaps the Gulf monarchies can learn from each other's experience rather than implement a Western model of civic participation. One thing is for certain; the Gulf leaders can either embrace a slow and managed reform process or risk being surprised by the sudden popularity of a civil society activist.

An Arabic version of this article first appeared in issue seven, September-October 2010 of Aafaq Al-Mustaqbal, an Arabic bimonthly journal published by The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research. It was written prior to the August-September 2010 unrest in Bahrain.

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