CHAPTER III

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE
ARAB GULF STATES
Political change in the Arab Gulf states have occurred in several stages. With the discovery of oil and the accumulation of oil wealth came an aggregation of power by the ruler and the ruling family. Oil income was seen as a fief for the benefit of the ruling family, either directly through the provision of generous allowances or indirectly through manipulation of nascent government agencies letting development contracts. Only gradually was the ruler and thereby the state, able to reassert control of the purse and of government organs.

After a decade or so, a new phase "constitutionalization", was initiated. This generally involved the adoption of a written constitution at independence, with some attempt at transference of the right to rule from simply tradition, within a tribal and Islamic context, to the exercise of authority in the name of the people, with whom sovereignty theoretically rests. In theory, members of the ruling families are under the same obligations and constraints as are all citizens, although this remains subject to abuse and the ruling families continue to monopolize power.

One of the most durable and far-reaching effects during this period of political change has been the process of institutionalization, which has embraced a number of aspects. There has been an emphasis on constitutionalism both
in the writing of formal constitutions and in the creation of a broader constitutional framework, which defines the nature and organization of the state and determines the scope and extent of activities of the regime. Second, the government structure has expanded tremendously as a result of a change in expectations - from a government that plays a minimalist role and exercises a few limited functions, to a government that is the source of nearly all authority and prosperity. Third, the rought-and-ready justice, based on Islamic and customary precepts dispensed by rulers in the past, has given way to a complex legal structure, partly Islamic, partly western, and embracing commercial, banking, labour, traffic, administrative and criminal regulations.¹

**Legitimacy Question**

Three broadly defined phases of political change can be discerned in the Arabian Peninsula: the traditional, the neotraditional, and the modernizing or post-traditional.² The traditional phase was characterized by decentralization and


limited central authority. The no-traditional phase occurring in Yemen and Oman produced political systems based on the personal strength of single individual introducing certain significant innovations into the system - particularly as they enhanced his own authority - in a defensive and ultimately futile attempt to maintain the traditional nature of the society. The modernizing phase was initiated by radical policies of socio-economic development, including the necessary restructuring of replacement of regimes and a redefinition or expansion of the scope and role of the state.

In recent decades, the impact of socio-economic development and the process of institutionalization have necessitated a reformulation of the basis of legitimacy. With the introduction of administrative reforms, new sources of "legitimacy" emerged: a corpus of laws, announcements, decisions, or decrees, made and enacted by increasingly sophisticated governments, followed intermittently by a system of representation in municipal councils, education, or health committees. Following independence in Kuwait and Bahrain, national assemblies were created to give regimes an aura of "legitimacy" through public delegation.  

The traditional pillars of the ruling families' legitimacy were based on reference to an idealized notion of traditional power-sharing in tribal society and Islam as represented in the Shari'a (Islamic law). Historically, the leader of the tribal community essentially served as a primus inter pares, a "chairman" rather than a ruler, who consulted tribal, religious, and merchant notables of the community before taking action. This allusion is reflected in the use of the term mubayaa (pledge of allegiance) in the National Assembly's approval of new heirs apparent. Rulers also found it necessary to govern in accordance with, or at least in reference to the Islamic principles of shura (consultation) and ijma (consensus). "We have all put our faith in shura, which was passed on to us from the book of our Good," when he said, "their affairs to be counselled among themselves" and his word, "you have consulted on the affairs. We practised this consultation at the levels of the family, neighbours, and relatives, and the homeland."  

To these traditional pillars of legitimacy, the newly emergent states of the Gulf have added policies of distributing material benefits to nearly all sectors of the citizenry,

rationalist constitutional frameworks, newly institutionalized government structures generally responsive to popular demands, and military-security apparatuses capable of controlling the population. The four written constitutions in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE place emphasis on Western-inspired principles of sovereignty residing in the people, the separation of powers between the branches of government and some degree of legislative power-sharing between the ruler and national councils. Saudi Arabia maintains that the sharia provides its constitution, while the constitutional framework of Oman is implied.

The Nature of Political Participation

Political participation can be defined as "a process whereby individuals engage in activity that impinges directly upon the national power and authority structure of society." Such activity can either challenge the system or support it. In the latter case, "large numbers of individuals came to support an authority structure to which they have meaningful access and which represents their interests" and, as the process of participation deepens, "the political elite will persistently both encourage and meet (increasing social and political) demands for expanding representation."  


6. Ibid, p.35.
The first demands of participation along non-traditional lines preceded the impact of oil. In Kuwait and Bahrain, these demands originated in the 1920s. The 1938 reform movements in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Dubai appear to have been inspired by the currents of constitutionalism and Arab nationalism percolating through the Middle East during that period. The social change engendered by oil wealth, with its opportunities for development, education, travel, changing lifestyles, and personal goals, has refocused and in some cases intensified, demands for political participation. Only the rush of oil wealth and the emphasis on material improvement in the 1970s muted these demands. Although differences are virtually invisible on the surface, the dialectic between regime and citizenry has become more problematic, and a solution to the still subdued contest over effective participation in decision making is much more difficult to discern.

Decision making in all the GCC states is the preserve of an extremely small elite. The elite is composed of members of ruling families in the first instance and of a small group of "civil servants" or technocrats drawn largely from prominent merchant families, in the second instance. The

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size and composition of this elite was determined in the first decade of each country's creation and development of present government infrastructures. Since then, there has been very little penetration of this circle, and most of the same decision makers have held the same or similar positions since those formative years. A look at the cabinets of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman demonstrates the longevity of the elite.8

There has been relatively greater mobility in the Kuwaiti and UAE cabinets. In the case of Kuwait, this has been due to a combination of a longer history of cabinets and a larger pool of, as well as greater receptivity to, technically qualified candidates. At the same time, cabinet members from the Al Sabah have tended to hold the same positions since independence except where changes have been rendered necessary due to death. In the UAE, greater mobility has been occasioned by the need to accommodate ruling family members and other qualified candidates from all seven amirates as well as by the change in the philosophy that reserved nearly all cabinet positions for ruling families.

Though limited, there are several aspects of active participation in these systems. First, rulers are not absolute monarchs, but their families form the primary

8. Peterson, n.2, pp.16-17.
decision-making bodies of the state, bodies that influence and occasionally contradict rulers. As large entities, these ruling families display a wide variety of opinions, strategies, and goals. Factions within the families may be influenced by certain sectors of the populace and may seek to either carry support from sympathetic sectors or maneuver against rival family factions through manipulation of sectors of the general population.

Second, there is traditional participation through the institutions of majlis and shura. Third, informal participation occurs as a result of institutional expansion. Non-members of ruling families, by dint of their education and personal qualifications, occupy prominent and influential positions in the government, including key cabinet and military posts. Although they may not make the final decisions themselves, they are often in a position to influence those decisions and to shape and present to the rulers the available options.

Fourth, indirect participation occurs in some states through the activities of public and semi-public organizations including social and sports clubs, student organizations, and professional societies. Fifth, specialized public or quasi-government bodies, such as municipal councils and chambers of commerce, influence decisions and often have elected members and leaders. Finally, the GCC states have had formal national
councils on the national level, with elections in the past for those in Kuwait and Bahrain.

Although government actions and decisions in general appear to enjoy the approval of the great majority of the populations, some dissent does exist over specific decisions and economic strategies. Channels for voicing criticism, let alone receiving genuine government consideration of such criticism, are rudimentary at best, however.

Although limited, dissent in the GCC states can be voiced in various ways and is still tolerated by regimes. Means of dissent include the following:

1. Informal Majlis: More than just a social gathering, the informal majlis (or diwan or diwaniya) is an institution in which personal relationships are maintained and strengthened, business is conducted, and politics is discussed. Even in the official majlises of government officials, subtle criticism can be expressed and public opinion on an issue gauged.

2. Press and Public Lectures: Until the assembly was suspended in July 1986, Kuwait's five daily Arabic newspapers were lively sources of reporting and political opinion on

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Kuwait and the other Gulf states. Sharjah's al-Khalij displays a strongly iconoclastic, pan-Arabist orientation and regularly publishes articles by Gulf political figures, including Kuwaiti "leftists". Newspapers and other UAE forums sponsor talks by controversial Kuwaiti, Bahraini, and UAE speakers, and student groups at Kuwait university offer lectures in which political problems are actively discussed. The other GCC states are far more restrictive in their implicit censorship of political discussion.¹⁰

3. Clubs, Societies, and Religious Institutions: In earlier decades, students returning from abroad established cultural clubs, which served to transmit political ideas and opinions. Cultural and literary clubs with political overtones first appeared in Bahrain and Kuwait in the 1920s and 1930s. In both countries, certain clubs organized political movements in the 1950s and 1960s to protest government policies, and later candidates for election lobbied clubs for votes. Clubs and professional societies also serve as agents of socialization among generations, social strata, and religious or ethnic groups. As the strongholds of the established merchant community, chamber of commerce play quasi-political roles as lobbyists.

¹⁰ Peterson, n.2, pp.19-20.
4. **National Councils**: Formed assemblies have functioned in all of the GCC states except Saudi Arabia, either as elected quasi-parliaments or as advisory councils. But, generally representation by popular vote has succeeded only in voluntary associations, such as clubs and professional societies which are not subject to government intervention. The government has always been represented in national councils by appointed functionaries with the same rights and privileges as elected members. The regimes thereby have been able to control these institutions but at the cost of considerable friction. To end the friction, the regimes sooner or later have dissolved the bodies they have established. 


5. ** Strikes and Demonstrations**: To a certain extent, reform activities in the twentieth century were tied to economic grievances, particularly among pearl divers at first and then later in the oil sector. Since the oil boom, though, strikes have become rare because of the non-participation of nationals in strikes and the increasing effectiveness of security forces.

6. **Subversive Organizations and Activities**: The great majority of Gulf citizens have not chosen the path of illegal
organizations and activities. Nevertheless, even a tiny radicalized minority can carry out acts with considerable psychological impact on regimes and on public opinion, as demonstrated by the discovery of a number of anti-government plots in Bahrain since 1981, the 1985 bombings in Riyadh, and the involvement of several indigenous Shia in the 1987 bombings in Kuwait.

The Roles of National Councils

The national councils of the Gulf are attempts to transform traditional informal institutions into modern formal institutions. These institutions are intended to legitimize the regime and at least provide the appearance of participation by all sectors of the citizenry in the state-building process during a period of rapid, difficult, and potentially destabilizing change.

The appearance in 1938 of reform movements, complete with attempts to create national councils, at three different places in the Gulf - Kuwait, Bahrain, and Dubai - provides evidence of an indigenous desire for such organs of formal political participation. The need and demand for formal national councils were limited in the past and may still remain low on the list of state priorities, yet the seeds of future expectations for democratic institutions are being sown now.
At least six formal or informal functions encompassed by the GCC's national councils can be discerned, as discussed below.

1. **Legitimation of the Regime:** A national council generally styled as a parliament or similar "democratic" institution, provides a degree of legitimacy to the ruling families and regimes. At the very least, it preserves the facade of constitutional legitimacy and implies a "social contract" between the government and its citizenry.

2. **Formalized Majlis:** Consciously or not, some national councils appear to be efforts to reconstruct, the traditional informal majlis in a formal, constitutional manner.

3. **Legislative Role:** Formal participation in the legislative process, let alone the right to debate government policy, initiate or defeat legislation, and override executive vetoes, has existed only in the two elected parliaments. Elsewhere, limited functions of legislative review have been introduced at the prerogative of the rulers, sometimes with the privilege of questioning ministers.

4. **Government Accountability:** The written constitutions of the Gulf specify that sovereignty rests with the people. Given the hereditary nature of rulers, their selection from chosen
families and their accepted right to appoint and dismiss cabinets, the only constitutional means of accountability rests within national councils. In a general sense, the legislative powers of these bodies constitute a check on government policies and activities. More specifically, accountability rests with the ability of the national councils to question responsible members of government about their personal actions or the activities of their ministry.

5. **Incipient Populism**: The national councils provide an outlet for the expression of opinions and grievances. As a result, members of national councils throughout the Gulf frequently have adopted a populist stance particularly when perceptions are strong that the poorer citizens are being hurt by the economic recession and resultant government policies.

6. **Legitimation of Political Participation by Minority of Non-elite Groups**:

Sectarian and ethnic minorities have been represented in the various bodies of the Gulf, either through election by fellow members of their communities or by the conscious efforts of governments to provide these groups with representation.
Each of the national councils are discussed in the following pages along with a general assessment of the councils.

**Political Participation**

**Kuwait:** The first consultative council in Kuwait was established in 1921. However, not until independence and the establishment of the National Assembly (Majlis al-Umma) did the roots of transformation to democratic representation begin to replace the old oligarchic system.

After the death of Shaykh Salim in 1921, a group of Kuwaiti notables seized the occasion to push the Al Sabah family to agree to the establishment of a consultative council with the ruler at its head. Twelve representatives of the merchant community were appointed to the new council and a leading merchant, Hamad al-Saqr, served as chairman. A few meetings apparently were held with the new ruler, Shaykh Ahmad (r. 1921-1950), but these were desultory and the council was reduced to internal quarreling. By 1928, membership had fallen to six (including two al Sabah), and moribund, the council eventually faded away.12

"Despite the failure of this first attempt at formal participation, Kuwait was increasingly affected by the ideas of nationalism and constitutionalism than buffeting the Arab world, and demands for political reform were seen to resurface."\(^{13}\) A municipal council was created in 1930 and in subsequent years it had a dozen elected members. Their relationship with the ruler was often stormy, and, in 1934, the ruler had the elected chairman, Sulayman al-Adsani, replaced. Two years later, an election was held for the Education Council. When the ruler dissolved the latter council and installed an appointed one, the municipal council resigned en masse.\(^{14}\)

The Consultative Council of 1938

These events proved to be a prelude to the renewed attempt to institute an elected consultative council in 1938.\(^{15}\)


The ruler's fightfistedness, both in expenditures on state services and in the allowances provided Al Sabah family members, his lack of attention to administration and justice, his retention of state income and fears that he would not share potential oil revenues (the first strike occurred in February 1938), the rigging of municipality elections, the loss of trade caused by the continuing Saudi blockade, the absence of development efforts, and a decade of Iraqi agitation against Al Sabah rule all contributed to the underlying discontent. Shaykh Ahmad's autocratic penchant, characterized by his treatment of the mid-1930s councils, fuelled the growing dissatisfaction and forced some Kuwaitis in exile in Iraq to form parties such as al Shabiba and the National Bloc. Nebulous groups began to argue variously for the replacement of the ruler by the heir apparent, protection from the ruler by the assumption of a British protectorate for the Shaykhdom, and political union with Iraq. 'Abd al-Hamid al-Sani' was arrested in September 1937, thus becoming Kuwait's first political prisoner.

The tension escalated into a crisis upon the public flogging of Muhammad al-Barrak in mid-March 1938 for "intriguing". Al-Barrak's associates, members of leading merchant families who had long discussed the need for a representative council, became fearful of reprisals; some sought British protection and other fled to Iraq. However, Shaykh Ahmad
yielded finally. A Committee formed a list of eligible voters from 150 Kuwaiti families, who elected a fourteen person council (Majlis at Umma al-Tashrii) on June 29 with heir apparent Sheikh 'Abdullah al-Salim as its Chairman. Sheikh Ahmad signed the document on 6 July 1938.

Amongst the early achievements of the council was the formation of a new, elected municipal council. The council lasted barely six months despite the promising start. Shaykh Ahmad resisted the council's attempts to write a permanent constitution which would severely constrain the ruler's powers. The ruler announced his intention to dissolve the council to which the council yielded on the ruler's agreement to hold new elections with the provision by which he could veto its decisions.

An electorate of 400 chose a new 20 member council, a few days later. Twelve members of the old council were re-elected, as well as a conservative (who had resigned from the earlier council), four supporters of the ruler, two apparent supporters of the council, and one neutral. The ruler abrogated the old constitution and announced a new one giving him veto rights. The council refused to accept the change. The ruler dissolved it on 7 March 1939.

A few incidents led to the appointment of an advisory council. Three days after the dissolution of the council, a water carrier named Muhammad al-Munayyis began speaking
against the ruler and handed out leaflets calling for the overthrow of the Al Sabah. As he was being led to jail, two members of the old council, Yusuf al Marzuq and Muhammad At Qitami, scuffled with his guards in an attempt to release Al Munayyis. The bedouin guards returned fire when Ahmad al-Marzuq apparently aimed a revolver at them, wounding Marzuq and a nearby shopkeeper and killing al-Qitami. Munayyis was convicted and executed (presumably of treason). The following day, five members of the old council were arrested along with a number of other people, while at least a dozen individuals (including several council members) fled to exile in Iraq. On 12 March Shaykh Ahmad appointed a 13 member advisory council, nine members were to be nominated by the ruler and the other four were from the Al Sabah family. The ineffective council soon faded away. In the forties no significant development took place so far as the democratic movement is concerned with the effect that the entire government remained in the hands of four senior Al Sabah.

In 1952 and 1954, elections were held for 12 member advisory committees for the municipality, health, education, and awqaf (religious endowments), but only the head of the Education Department cooperated with his council and the others failed to function effectively. In 1954, the disappointing showing of these councils in curtailing the abuses of the members of the ruling families in charge of
these departments, as well as the slowdown in development after the rapid pace of the previous year, prompted the merchants to present the ruler with a petition for the reform of the administration, including a central council to be formed of selected representative from the elected councils. In response, the amir formed a Higher Executive Committee (HEC-al-Haya al-Tanfidhiya al-Ulya) to reorganize the administration, but it was not well regarded and had to contend with the amirs influential uncle, 'Abdullah al Mubarak. As a consequence, pamphlets attacking the committee and calling for a national council were distributed in the name of the Kuwait democratic league and other organizations.

Throughout the 1950s discontent continued to simmer over the indecision of the Kuwaiti government. In May 1955, Sada al-Iman, a weekly newspaper, collected signatures to a petition for an elected assembly which resulted in the creation of a Family Council in November 1955 to serve only as a surrogate for a cabinet. The consequent discontent was expressed by the National, Cultural, Graduates and Teachers clubs, in such weekly newspapers as Sada al-Iman and Akhbar al-Usbu and in public meetings. As expected, the government


17. FO/371/109810, "Reports on Kuwait Administration and Subversion (1954)".
suppressed such activities by censoring the newspapers and so forcing them to cease publication and by issuing warnings of imprisonment to the leaders of the clubs. 18

Nevertheless, organized political opposition continue to proliferate. Various clubs were established in the fifties. The British intervention in Suez on 29 October 1956 prompted a general strike and the resignation of a number of Kuwaiti officials. In another event, saboteurs set off 10 explosions around the Ahmadi oil Camp and the nearby oil port. 19

The Constituent Assembly (1962)

Soon after the attainment of Kuwaiti independence on 19 June 1961, a committee of senior Al Sabah members and representatives of the merchants community was formed to make preparations for an elected constituent assembly. In the election of 30 December 1961 there were 74 candidates for 20 seats. The inclusion of the cabinet ministers as ex-officio members raised total membership to 31. The assembly was dissolved after it submitted the constitution to the amir, who signed it on 11 November 1962.

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The constitution envisages an electro National Assembly which consists of 50 members elected by secret ballot (Article 80), as well as all non-elected cabinet ministers as ex-officio members (Article 81). Members must be Kuwaiti by origin, qualified as an elector, 30 years old, and literate in Arabic (Article 82). The amir may dissolve the assembly once but must call for new elections within two months (Article 107). Assembly members may put questions to the prime minister and the other ministers and raise debate on matters within their competence (Article 99-100), and individual ministers are subject to votes of re-confidence (Article 101), although only the amir has the right to demand the resignation of the prime minister or the cabinet as a whole (Article 102).

Ministers are to be appointed from assembly members and others and the cabinet is not to exceed one-third the members of the assembly (Article 56). Before assuming office, the amir is directed to swear an oath to respect the constitution and defend the state before a special session of the assembly (Article 60). Laws may be promulgated only after being passed by the National Assembly and sanctioned by the amir (Article 79), and the assembly can override the amir's veto by a two-thirds majority (Article 66). The assembly must approve the state's annual budget (Article 140)
and a two-thirds majority and the approval of the amir is required for revision of the constitution (Article 174).

National Assembly (1963-1976)

On 23 January 1963, the first elections to the National Assembly were held with 205 candidates vying for the votes of 17,000 male citizens for one of the 50 seats. The assembly was suspended in 1976 after the elections of 1967, 1971 and 1975. The lists of candidates averaged over 200. The number of eligible voters increased to nearly 27,000 in 1967, more than 40,000 in 1971, and nearly 53,000 in 1975, although less than 60 per cent actually voted in those elections.\(^\text{20}\)

Henceforth the cabinet ministers found their actions and policies open to public scrutiny within the assembly. The old oligarchy of shaykhly families and the merchant elite, which had monopolized power in Kuwait in the past, found itself sharing power with the sedentarized bedouin and with the emerging middle class of businessmen, government officials, professionals, and intellectuals.\(^\text{21}\)

The first National Assembly emerged as a forum for criticism of government policy. The Al Sabah minister of defense and interior came in for public interrogation of their actions.

\(^{20}\) Baz, n.12, pp.197-8.

\(^{21}\) Aruri, "Kuwait", p.31.
ministerial policies. The validity of the December 1964 cabinet was opposed on the grounds that some of its members were engaged in business in violation of the constitution (Article 131), and the government was forced to form a new cabinet in January 1965. It also forced modifications in royalty agreements with the concessionary oil companies. In foreign policy, the nationalists called for abrogation of the 1961 agreement with Britain for defense assistance and for negotiations toward Arab unity.\(^{22}\)

In the second assembly (1967-1971), the position of the nationalists was severely eroded. Most of the 26 new members were regarded as conservative and pro-government. Only four members of the nationalist bloc were re-elected. Thirty-eight candidates (including six successful ones) were joined by student and professional organizations in accusing the government of rigging the elections, and seven newly elected members refused their seats in protest.\(^{23}\) The Arab defeat in the June 1967 war, and by implication the failure of Nasirism and pan-Arabism, was cited as the major reason for the decline of the nationalists, as well as the beginning of influence for the Islamics (\textit{al-Islamiyun}; Islamic ideologues).\(^{24}\)

\(^{22}\) Ibid, pp.335-7; Baz, n.12, pp.187-93.

\(^{23}\) Aruri, n.21, pp.338-9; Baz, n.12, pp.193-4.

\(^{24}\) Interviews in Kuwait. Cited in Peterson, n.13, p.39.
However, the strength of the nationalists was increased in 1971 elections. In the 1975 elections, nearly half the winners were new to the assembly and the resultant body was younger, better educated, and less conservative than its predecessors. 25

On 29 August 1976, the National Assembly was dissolved and restrictions were put on the press. Moreover, he suspended the articles of the constitution requiring a member of the cabinet to be drawn from the elected National Assembly (Article 57), providing for either new elections within two months or reinstitution of the old assembly (Article 107), requiring National Assembly approval of any constitutional revisions (Article 174), and forbidding the suspension of the constitution except under martial law and forbidding the suspension of National Assembly meetings during martial law (Article 187).

The National Assembly (1981-1985)

Within the four years of suspension of the National Assembly, Amir Jabir set in motion the process of its restoration. "That he was not personally opposed to the assembly (unlike other Al Sabah), the popularity of such a move, and the desirability of demonstrating the legitimacy and openness

of the regime in the face of the Iranian revolution, which had raised tensions considerably in the amirate, undoubtedly contributed to his decision."26

A number of changes were introduced in the electoral law also. The number of electoral districts were increased from 10, each electing 5 members, to 25, each electing only 2. "There were also allegations that the government had gerrymandered the boundaries and sizes (the numbers of eligible voters varied between 3,000 and 13,000) of these districts in order to increase conservative bedouin representation and decrease troublesome nationalist and perhaps Shia representation. The regime had perceived the vocal nationalist opposition group in the National Assemblies of the 1960s and 1970s a particularly potent and worrisome threat."27 More freedom for the Islamics was also permitted.

On 23 February 1981, out of the 90,000 Kuwaitis eligible, only 42,000 actually voted, the lowest proportional turnout in Kuwaiti history. "Although the victory of 13 young technocrats and 4 Islamics may have been expected, the return of 24 to 27 bedouin loyalists was not an accurate reflection of Kuwait's social structure. The dismal showing


27. Ibid.
of the nationalists seemed to substantiate the gerrymandering charges. The Shia's did even worse: despite putting up a third of the total candidates and having held 10 seats in the previous assembly, only two Shi'a won election."28

The Sixth Assembly (1985-1986)

In the election of February 1985, 238 candidates contested for 50 seats. "The election of 31 new comers to the Assembly was a good indication that this assembly would be more energetic, sophisticated, and critical than the preceding one."29 As usual, the government retained control of the voting with the election of bedouin to more than half the seats. Unofficial primaries were held in some outlying districts to ensure the eventual election of suitable tribal candidates.30

Although the reappearance of the small bloc of Arab nationalists posed little threat to the government's voting majority, their relative organization as a bloc and their vociferous criticism of government policies made them a controversial element. The election's impact on the Islamics

was mixed: several incumbent Islamics were defeated but the election of others meant their numbers held steady. Shia representation increased from two to three.  

Like the Fourth Assembly (suspended in 1977), the Sixth Assembly was vocal and critical of the government in its 16 month existence. The government was slow in sorting out the Suq al-Manakh mess, and accusations abounded that the delay was aimed at protecting prominent Kuwaitis and even the Al Sabah involved in the crash. In addition, the economic recession gave substance to populist concerns about growing hardships for poor Kuwaitis, the need to cut back on subsidies to Arab frontline states, and increased utility charges and decreased government services. Other prominent issues included the question of open admission for Kuwaiti students to the university, restrictions on granting citizenship, and the fairness in applying conscription. The emergence of a coalition of National Assembly members in an opposition bloc led to close questioning of some cabinet members and to the forced resignation of Justice Minister Shaykh Salman al-Duayi Al Sabah and the near-resignation of Oil Minister Shaykh Ali al-Khalifa Al Sabah.  


32. Peterson, n.13, p.46.
The cabinet offered its resignation on 1 July 1986 and subsequently the National Assembly was suspended on 3 July. Press freedom was severely curtailed. The timing was significant, coming soon after a fresh spate of bombings and immediately before a scheduled interrogation of several ministers. The amir's decree announcing the suspension lamented that "its (Kuwait's) security was exposed to fierce external plots", that "the flames of war raging between its two Muslim neighbours have almost reached its borders and it has faced a strong economic crisis" and "instead of pooling efforts and all parties cooperating in order to contain these crises, opinions were divided, and blocs and parties emerged which have led to the shattering of national unity and the interruption of work until the Council of Ministers has become unable to continue its task."

The second suspension had an air of permanence about it, unlike the earlier one. The government had been unsuccessful in pushing the Fifth National Assembly to adopt constitutional amendments restricting the assembly's powers. Censorship was far more severe than in 1976, and a number of leading journalists were deported. Without the encumbrance

33. Ibid, p.47.
34. Text broadcast on Kuwait Domestic Service, 3 July 1986 (FBIS, Middle East and Africa, 7 July 1986).
of opposition from the assembly, the electoral law was amended to make naturalised citizens ineligible to vote for 30 years after naturalization. 35

An Assessment of the Role of the National Assembly

The National Assembly bears little resemblance to the traditional 'majlis'. Nevertheless, the 'diwaniya's held regularly by most assembly members provide a forum in which they may solicit public opinion on issues, as well as receive complaints and requests for assistance.

The idea of popular representation is deeply rooted in Kuwaiti history and there is great pride in "Kuwaiti democracy". Though the constitution specifies that the system of government is democratic (Article 6), it stipulates hereditary rulership within the Al Sabah (Article 4).

The National Assembly has performed important legislative role. From its inception, the National Assembly has exercised its constitutionally granted right to review and approve legislation. 36

The issue of government accountability came to the forefront when the Sixth Assembly tested its constitutional

35. Law Decree No.30 of 1986, 18 October 1986, text in Majallat Dirasat al-Khalij wal-Jazira al-Arabiya 13, no.49 (January 1987), pp.244-5.

right to express no-confidence in cabinet minister by applying it to two Al Sabah ministers. The decline in oil revenues, downstream diversification of the oil sector, deepening economic recession, and Suq al-Manakh all generated debate over government policy during the Sixth Assembly.

The electoral process has given birth to what is called incipient populism. Because of the small size of the electoral districts and the lavish expenditure on campaigns, candidates have ample opportunity for face-to-face contact with nearly every potential voter. The institution of 'diwaniya' has reinforced the populist role of the assembly member.

Bahrain

In the twentieth century Bahrain politics has been the preserve of the Al Khalifa, their tribal allies and a few prominent merchants. In 1938, Bahrain witnessed, what can be called, a constitutional movement. Grievances remained against intolerant members of the ruling family more dissemination of nationalist sentiment due to increased education and communications, a group of emerging well-to-do merchants sought a greater say in state policies. One merchant, Yusuf Fakhru, took it upon himself to gather the other merchants together with Shaykh Salman and some Shia representatives to formulate a list of demands including the establishment of
a legislative council and further reforms within the state administration. 37

Posters in support of these demands began to appear in October 1938. The government arrested a number of Sunni leaders of the movement in November. This resulted in more posters, demonstrations, preparation for a strike against BAPCO, and a call for a general strike, which soon collapsed for each of leadership. The more moderate elements immediately formed a committee to draw up more reasonable demands, covering improvements in education, the courts, the municipalities, and the formation of a labour committee and a consultative council. The amir rejected the majority of these demands, including the consultative council and BAPCO subsequently dismissed 18 leaders of the strike. 38

The 1950s saw a deepening politicization, particularly through the development of social and cultural clubs and the founding of a local press. Students abroad, exposed to Pan-Arab nationalist and socialist movements, returned home and founded cultural/political clubs, displacing an earlier generation of old conservative leaders. Eventually, an alliance was struck between Sunni and Shia activists against a regime perceived as fundamentally intolerant to both sects.

38. Ibid, p.66.
Strikes broke out against BAPCO in 1942-43 and again in 1947-48. Changing expectations of government due to socio-economic development, the growth of Arab nationalist sentiment among Bahrainis, and mounting anti-British feelings all played a part in maintaining a climate of hostility between the regime and a core of political activists. A Higher Executive Committee (HEC-al-Haya al-Tanfidhiya al-Ulya) was formed on 13 October 1954, which petitioned the government for a legislative council, the codification of criminal and civil law, the right to form trade unions, and the establishment of a higher appeal court.

In October 1955, the ruler agreed to set up three councils, half elected and half appointed, to supervise the departments of health and education and various municipalities. Not incidentally, as it provided the people of Bahrain with some say in their government, it also served to sidetrack, at least temporarily, the HEC's demands for a legislative council, as well as objections to the adviser.

In 1968, the British government announced its intention to withdraw from the Gulf in 1971. By 1970, it became clear that Bahrain's impending status as a separate sovereign state required major improvements in the structure of government. Government departments had been added in the 1950s and 1960s but executive authority still was held informally by

the Al Khalifa the Administrative Council notwithstanding. On 19 January 1970, the Administrative Council was transformed into a council of state, serving as a de facto cabinet and composed of a combination of Al Khalifa and notables close to the regime. This council was renamed the council of Ministers upon independence in 1971.  

Following worker's riots against the spiralling cost of living in March 1972, consultations were initiated on the subject of a constitution and national assembly. The Al Khalifa viewed the proposed National Assembly as a modification of the traditional principle of Shura, which in no way restricted their legitimate right to rule. On 20 July 1972, the ruler announced elections for a Constituent Assembly to approve a draft constitution to be drawn up by a government subcommittee. In the election of December 1972, 22 members were chosen out of 58 candidates, by 27,000 male voters. Fourteen of the 22 elected members were Shia. Bahrain's women's societies organized meetings in August and September 1972 to protest their exclusion, and a petition demanding the right to participate in the political life of


the country was presented to the amir on 20 November 1972 but without any effect. 42

After six months of vigorous debate, on 2 June 1973 the assembly approved a constitution largely modelled on that of Kuwait. 43 The electoral law, set the voting age at 20, effectively denied naturalized citizens the right to vote because they were required to have been naturalised for 10 years prior to the enactment of the 1963 citizenship law, and prohibited women and members of the armed forces and police from voting. 44

The constitution provides for the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, and vests legislative power jointly in the amir and the National Assembly (Article 32). The amir has the sole power to appoint and remove the Prime Minister and the other members of the Cabinet (Article 33). Ministers are to be ex-officio members of the assembly and their number is limited to 14 (Article 33).

The amir alone has been given the power to promulgate laws (Article 35). The National Assembly is to consist of 30 members elected by secret ballot in the first assembly and

42. Nakhleh, n.41, pp.142-3.


44. Nakhleh, n.41, pp.126-7.
40 members thereafter (Article 43). The amir may dissolve the assembly once but must call for new elections within two months, failing which the assembly is restored (Article 65). Ministers are responsible to the National Assembly for the affairs of their respective ministries, and the assembly members can put questions to individual ministers and can pass votes of no-confidence against individual ministers (Article 66-68). If two-thirds of the assembly decide they cannot cooperate with the Prime Minister, the matter is submitted to the amir, who may relieve the Prime Minister of office and appoint a new cabinet or dissolve the assembly (Article 69).

Individual members of the assembly have the right to initiate bills, and a minimum of five members may raise discussion on any subject of general interest (Articles 71-72). Membership in the National Assembly is deemed incompatible with public office except in the case of Ministers (Article 80). The annual budget must be ratified by the National Assembly (Article 94), and a two-thirds majority and the approval of the amir is required for revision of the constitution, except that the principle of hereditary rule may not be proposed for amendment (Article 104).

The National Assembly existed from 1973 to 1975. The first elections were held on 4 December 1973, with 114 candidates vying for about 29,000 votes for the 30 seats.
The "popular" (leftist, nationalist, or reformist) bloc won eight seats and the religious bloc won six seats.\textsuperscript{45}

The winning "popular" candidates included four Arab nationalists, two Marxists, one Socialist, and one Bathi. All six winning religious candidates were Shia. Two of these were jurists, one was a journalist, one was a mulla, and two were elementary school teachers.\textsuperscript{46} Once in office, the six independently elected candidates formed a bloc around a platform focusing on enforcing conformity with Islamic precepts, such as prohibiting alcohol, co-education, and the participation of women in public life. The independents were regarded as the "government bloc" because they tended to support government policy in general, while the "popular" and "religious" blocs formed a tacit alliance against the government on various issues.

Following labour riots in January and June of 1974, the amir sought to enact a new security law without recourse to the assembly. It would give the Ministry of the Interior the authority to arrest and detain for three years without a court appearance anyone suspected working against the state or even intending to act. The "popular" bloc, with support from other members, demanded that the law be submitted

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p.168.

\textsuperscript{46} Khuri, n.3, pp.225-6.
to the assembly and debated there. The government’s position weakened as the issue remained in the public consciousness and debates continued in the National Assembly.

Sensing defeat, the government withdrew from participation in the assembly in May 1975, forcing an adjournment. On 23 August 1975, the Interior Ministry announced the arrest of 30 NFLB and PFLOAG members and banned activities of the Union of Baharini students. The amir dissolved the National Assembly on 26 August and suspended the constitutional article requiring new elections.

Without the hindrance of an assembly, the security law was enacted and used to arrest a number of leftists and three assembly members. Despite the laws provision for a maximum detention of three years, detainees were incarcerated for five, six, and even seven years. After the law had been in operation for four or five years, the government put it aside and simply detained individuals without going through the court procedure. 47

An Assessment of the Role of National Assembly

The Bahraini constitution, modelled largely on that of Kuwait, also specifies that Bahrain shall have a democratic

47. Interviews in Bahrain, cited in Peterson, n.13, p.77.
system of government with sovereignty residing in the people, "the source of all powers", who have the right to elect. But this declaration is found in the same article as the designation of the state as a hereditary monarchy (Article 1). However, many in the Al-Khalifa described the National Assembly in terms of an extension of Shura, rather than popular participation in policy-making.

There has been an adversarial relationship between ruling elite and ruled masses in Bahrain, rather than a partnership between relatively equal tribal and merchant communities. The size and ingrown nature of the ruling family has discouraged outside participation in the political process and reduced the principle of majlis to simple petitioning. Once it became clear that the National Assembly would not function as a formalized majlis, it was terminated.

The assembly had little opportunity to develop its constitutional legislative role. However, the confrontational attitude and tactics of the left (and possibly also the Islamics) diverted the assembly's attention away from approving draft legislation to polemics. Due to the suspension of the assembly, the Council of Ministers acknowledges that the cabinet cannot take on the assembly's role in providing checks-and-balances and indicate that the assembly eventually will be reconstituted. 48

48. Ibid, p.78:
So far as government accountability is concerned, the Left and the reformist movement had been demanding a formal means of accountability for 20 years. The government, suspicious of the opposition's intentions and fearful of threats of internal security, refused to accept any checks on its policies. The resulting head-on collision between the regime and the popular bloc over the security law virtually guaranteed an end to the democratic experiment.

Regarding the prospects for reinstitution of the assembly, there has been a debate in the press. After describing the 1985 elections in Kuwait, an editorial in *al-Mawaqif* opined that the democratic approach in Kuwait provided the best means of dealing with the events in the Gulf.49 At the same time, under the headline, "democracy is not contradictory to the state!" *Sada al-Usbu* reported that democracy was the only means of dissolving the differences between the government and the people.50

However, these occasional signals produced no discernible movement and no real prospects. Most Bahrainis appear to favour the assembly's return, and government ministers even mention it favourably in conversation.

In contrast to Kuwait and Bahrain, Qatar has emerged as a distinct political entity only relatively recently. As Emile Nakhleh notes, "Qatar has experienced neither the euphoria of drafting, ratifying and promulgating a constitution, nor the trauma of the failure of such a constitution. Generally speaking, the al-Thani ruling family in Qatar has not supported the more liberal trends of its al-Khalifa counterpart in Bahrain. Furthermore, compared to Bahrain, Qatar has had a smaller population, a more limited level of education and a much more recent labour tradition. Being part of the Arabian desert mainland, Qatar has not experienced as much with other cultures as has the island country of Bahrain. In addition, Qatar has not had a politically conscious class of urban intelligentsia, as is the case in Bahrain." 51 The leadership of the giant ruling Al Thani family has been unchallenged since emerging in the mid-nineteenth century.

A popular demand for a representative body was raised as early as the 1950s, and, in response, an Advisory Council was appointed in 1964. The ruler was to serve as president

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of the council and the deputy ruler as vice-president. Its membership of 15 was drawn entirely from the Al Thani and balanced to represent all the branches of the family. The council never met although it provided a precedent for the later creation of a broader council.

Constitutional and Legislative Development

A provisional constitution was issued on 2 April 1970 in anticipation of independence. The amended provisional constitution of 19 April 1972 was enacted for a "period of transition"; it still remains in force. In the constitution, the state is described as democratic, Arab, and Islamic, with the Sharia as the fundamental source of legislation (Article 1). Executive power is vested in the amir (Article 18), judicial power in the courts (issuing judgements in the name of the amir, Article 19 of the first constitution but not mentioned in the second), and legislative power implicitly in the amir, who is to promulgate laws on the recommendations of the Council of Ministers and the advice of the Advisory Council (Article 17).

52. The council was established by Law 6 of 6 May 1964, as published in al-Jarida al-Rasmiya, no.3, 6 May 1964.

Rulership in declared hereditary within the Al Thani (Article 21). The description of the duties of deputy ruler, including serving as prime minister (originally Article 26), were excised from the amended version and the office of prime minister entrusted to the amir (Article 33). The Amir has the sole right to appoint and dismiss the Council of Ministers (Articles 28-29).

The constitution also describes the formation and duty of a consultative council in detail (Articles 40-64). It has 10 explicit legislative function but expresses opinions in the form of recommendations (Article 40). At the same time however, the council is given the power to debate draft laws, debate general state policies and draft budgets, and put questions to the Council of Ministers or to individual ministers on matters within their competence (Article 51). The amir may dissolve the council, provided a new council is formed within a month (Article 61), and dismiss individual members (Article 62). The original provisional constitution provided for the election of a council similar to those of Kuwait and Bahrain, consisting of 20 elected members and the ministers as ex-officio members (Article 44). Four candidates were to be elected in each of 10 districts, from which the ruler was to choose two to represent that district in the council; it also mandated elections within 30 days of the constitution coming into effect (Article 45). Elections
were never held, and the amended constitution only refers to elections by direct secret ballot within 60 days of the expiry of the council's term of office (Article 46).

The Advisory Council (Majlis al-Shura) was formed soon after the accession of Shaykh Khalifa ibn Hamad as amir in 1972. Initially, the council consisted of 20 appointed members, plus the cabinet as ex-officio members but it was expanded to 30 appointed members in 1975. It is important to note the criteria of members. The constitution stipulates that council members must be original Qatari citizens, not less than 24 years old, and not convicted of breach of honour (Article 42). They also must be of respectable social standing, of good judgement, and of competence in various fields (Articles 43). Technically, there has been only one council since its establishment in 1972. Originally convened to serve for a single year, its life was extended for a further three years. Since then, the council has been extended at regular intervals: until 1978, until 1982, until 1986 and until 1990. As a consequence, the council members are those appointed in 1972 and 1975. There have been only four new appointments, necessitated by the deaths

54. Materials on the council is drawn primarily from the State of Qatar, Advisory Council, The Advisory Council in Brief (prepared by Qusai al-Abadleh, tr. by Fauzi Abdullah; Doha, 1401/1981); and from interviews with members of the council, the secretariat, and other Qataris in Doha, cited in Peterson, n.13, pp.86-87.
of members, and, typically, the new members have been close relatives of the deceased.

Because Qatar is a small country, the amir can readily choose members who accurately reflect the country's important constituencies. Members are chosen to represent the merchant community (seven members), important tribes (ten members), the educated (six members), and to make sure that outlying districts are represented (five members). Qatar's small Shia community is probably over-represented, with at least one if not two members. At one point, the government proposed forbidding public servants to hold membership in the Advisory Council, but the Council advised against it because Qatar's population is so small and the country needs to utilize fully its few educated people.

It is significant that all of Qatar's important constituencies are closely reflected in the Advisory Council's membership, and the members represent their constituencies in the Advisory Council in much the same way they always had done so in the ruler's traditional majlis. The amir seeks the advice or opinion of many of the same people on an informal basis as the government does formally. 55

Because opinions have been voiced already and issues thrashed

55. Peterson, n.13, pp.87-88.
out privately in the amir's majlis, the likelihood of controversy surfacing in the council's deliberations is reduced significantly and consensus is more apt to be obtained. The comparison between majlis and the council is reinforced by holding the proceedings in camera and not reporting the deliberations in the press or showing them on television (as elsewhere in the Gulf) and because vacancies (which occur only upon death) are filled by sons or brothers, thus ensuring continued representation for the constituency.

The personal standing on the representativeness of the council's members are such that any elections quite likely would produce a similar roster of members. As a younger, educated Qatari noted, in any election between himself and an elder, respected Qatari, the elder undoubtedly would win.

However the situation is likely to change. Now, when a member dies, he is replaced by a member of his family or tribe. But soon, the present generation of elders or traditional Qatars will be gone and the families and tribes will have to agree on younger individuals, now in their 40s, whose outlooks may be different. This change was noticed in 1975 when an additional 10 members, most of them younger and educated, were appointed to the council to diffuse the consistent traditionalist domination of the council's vote on nearly every issue.
Interestingly, even the educated representatives tend to be traditionalist. One of the most prominent members of the council is the under secretary in the Ministry of Education, Abd al-Aziz Abdullah ibn Turki. While he is educated and a competent modernist government official, he is also said to be concerned with inculcating traditional Islamic values in Qatar's school, in much the same manner as his minister, a member of the Al-Thani. Thus, he fits easily into the Advisory Council milieu. 56

So far as the legislative function of the Advisory Council is concerned, draft laws proposed by the cabinet are referred to the council for its recommendations, amendments, and revisions, and then returned to the cabinet which may or may not accept council's changes. The cabinet then submits them to the amir. The government is not constitutionally bound to respect the opinion of the Advisory Council, but it does so approximately 90 per cent of the time. In the other 10 per cent of the cases, the government normally tries to justify its decision to the council, which then generally accepts the government version. In addition, draft budgets are also sent to the council for review, and its opinion and all decree laws issued during the council's recesses are referred to the council when it returns in

56. Ibid, pp.88-89.
session. The council may either approve the decree or recommend that the cabinet issue a new draft law, but it cannot amend the decree itself.

Despite its limited role, the Advisory Council has registered its refusal to accept the government's legislation on more than one occasion. In 1974, a draft law on public housing was deemed unsuitable and a new law drawn up by the cabinet at the council's request. During the 1984-85 term, decree laws were issued regarding civil service and military pensions. The laws were vigorously opposed by the council and were rejected and sent back to the cabinet for redrafting.

An Assessment

Although debate on political, economic, and administrative policies is limited to matters referred to the council by the government, the council can initiate discussion on social and cultural affairs. In addition, it has the right to request written or oral statements from members of the cabinet. Alternatively, the minister, if present at the council session, may be questioned directly. Although inquiries are only requests, no minister is said to have refused it. However, the council does not have the right to put a vote of confidence to the government or any minister.

Though the accountability is not so effective, the council is not entirely a rubber stamp. Its defenders point
to those instances when legislation was rejected and to the appearance before the council of under secretaries, ministers, and possibly even the amir's brother. Tribal representatives still have influence and they are not afraid to oppose a policy of the government or amir in the Advisory Council, and less than in the majlis. The council's existence provides a healthy contribution to a system in which the government's policy making otherwise would be done totally by the cabinet.

Besides, the explicit inclusion in the constitution of provisions for the Advisory Council and the council's activity indicate that it does provide a certain measure of legitimation to the regime. Its symbolic role is strengthened by its capabilities as a forum for discussing issues of the day. While its cautiousness in keeping its deliberations secret may satisfy the traditional requirement for consensus in public arenas while serving as an indicator of public opinion, this hinders its potential effectiveness as a perceived institution for political participation. However of all the Gulf national councils, only that of Qatar refuses to make its sessions public or allows its proceedings to be published. Few younger Qataris appear to have a good idea of the council's activities, know that it actually criticizes the government and influences legislation, or realize that the amir listens closely to the council's advice.
United Arab Emirates

The UAE was formed as a federation of the small Trucial States in December 1971. A provisional constitution was promulgated at independence, along with the necessary executive and administrative organs for the new federal state, and was amended in 1972 to reflect Ras al-Khayma's inclusion in the Union. It described the UAE as a federal state (Article 1) and specified the nature of the relationship between the federal entity and the individual amirates, which retain sovereignty over their own territories and territorial waters (Article 3).

The most important of the federal institutions is the supreme council or the Council of Rulers, representing the supreme authority in the state and consisting of all seven rulers or their deputies (Article 46). As the highest authority, the council reviews and approves all important matters within the UAE. Its decisions require a high degree of consensus, i.e., the approval on substantive matters of at least five of the seven members (Article 49).

The supreme council is empowered to delegate authority to other institutions. It elects the president and the

vice-president of the state from its members for five years terms (Articles 51 and 52). Given the rarity with which the council has met in recent years, the president acts virtually alone. He has the authority to appoint the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, and the other members of the cabinet (Article 54).

Constitutional and Legislative Development

The constitutional movement sweeping the Gulf in the late 1930s influenced UAE also. The maritime and trading environments of Kuwait, Bahrain, and Dubai had provided their merchant communities with a relative degree of cosmopolitanism and education, as well as a growing desire for political reform. In addition, the decline of pearling, which had thrown much of the Arab littoral into poverty, deepened their economic concerns and prompted them to test their emerging strength. 58

Dubai was ruled by Said ibn Maktum Al Maktum (1912-1958) in a traditional manner, according to the Sharia and single-handedly except for an occasional majlis called to provide advice. Said's rule, however, had been challenged

periodically by members of his own Al Bu Falasa Clan, particularly his cousins from the Rashid section. The dissident Al Bu Falaha incited mass demonstrations against the ruler in March 1938. A list of demands was presented, and the dissidents turned Dayra into an armed camp, calling for a representative council like the one established in Kuwait in July. 59

On 20 October 1938, Shaykh Said avoided being deposed by agreeing to the establishment of a consultative majlis, composed of 15 members nominated by the leading members of the Dubai community and with the ruler as its head. The majlis was to approve all expenditures, with a majority needed to pass decisions. The majlis proceeded to carry out reforms in the customs service, set up municipal and merchants' councils, improve security and establish three schools.

The ruler, however, regarded the majlis as an illegitimate body. In addition, it seems clear that the Al Bu Falasa leaders of the reform movement acted in their own self-interest as much as a true desire for administrative and political reforms. The attempt in March 1939 to reduce the ruler's income to a fixed sum of Rs.10,000 was the last straw.

A few weeks later, Shaykh Said used the occasion of the son's wedding in Dayra to have loyal bedouin seize control of the town. Several members of the majlis were attacked and killed; half of the council surrendered, while the other half fled to Sharjah.

The six-month existence of the Dubai majlis resulted in the permanent adoption of some changes, such as needed improvements to the harbour and town. A 15-member advisory council (including five members of the old majlis but only seven Al Bu Falasa in all) and a merchants' council were instituted in April 1939.

The Federal National Council

The origins of the UAE's national council go back to the 1968-71 negotiations for federation between Bahrain, Qatar, and the seven amirates now comprising the UAE. The assembly subsequently saw life within the UAE as the Federal National Council (FNC 0 al-Majlis al-Watani al-Ittihadi), which first met in February 1972. The 40 seats are distributed proportionately among the seven amirates, with Abu Dhabi and Dubai each receiving eight, Sharja and Ras al-Khaima each receiving six, and four seats each to the three remaining amirates. Each ruler chooses the members allocated to his amirate, who serve for two years and may be reappointed.
The council elects its own president, two deputies, two rapporteurs, and eight standing committees. 60

So far as composition of membership is concerned, the majority of FNC members are businessmen. Many of the representatives from Dubai, Sharjah, and Ra's al-Khayma come from prominent, urbanized old merchant families, while the other amirates' members tend to be of tribal background who entered commerce on their own. Most members were educated in the traditional manner, although several of the old members are from the first generation of UAE citizens to receive modern education at the beginning of the oil age. During the 1984-1986 session, the FNC boasted four university graduates, including one from the new UAE university in al-Ayn. 61

As the constitution stipulates, all federal legislation, including budgets, is referred to the FNC, which may approve, amend, or reject draft bills (Articles 89, 90). The UAE president, with the concurrence of the Council of Rulers, however, may promulgate a bill over the FNC's objections (Article 110). As such, the council plays a strong advisory role, and is not merely a rubber stamp. Moreover, the

60. Information on national councils in the UAE is gathered from Anthony, Arab States of the Lower Gulf; Heard-Bey, From Trucial States to Unified Arab Emirates; Khalifa, The United Arab Emirates, and various UAE newspapers.

government is bound to pay close attention to the FNC because the council's members are all fairly important people among the small number of UAE citizens.

The range of the FNC's business is indicated by the following summary at the end of the 1982-1983 sittings: 16 draft federal laws were approved. Twelve meetings were held in the second half of the session, during which six general issues relating to government policies in the fields of justice, communications, security, information and encouragement of national contractors were discussed, and an extraordinary session was held on state security policy. 62

The FNC very often asserts itself when the draft laws are submitted to it. For example, a number of stormy debates accompanied the article-by-article process of approving the country's penal code, making it the most debated legal document in the history of the UAE. In particular, objections were raised to an article providing for up to 10 years of imprisonment for membership in subversive organizations on the grounds that the provision could jeopardize legitimate democratic activities. A related article proposing stiff penalties for the establishment of organizations without government consent, as well as for membership in any un-

approved organization even while outside the country, was roundly attacked as abridging the personal rights and liberties of UAE citizens. Although the articles eventually were passed, they had been amended by the minister of justice, who had been present during the debates.63

Government accountability has increased with the FNC becoming more vociferous in recent years. In 1986, the council sent a memorandum to the Supreme Council of Rulers stressing the necessity for certain changes, including the need for economic diversification and an end to duplication of administrative institutions on both the federal and amirate level.

The constitutional provision that the government should be represented in FNC meetings, whenever requested has also been taken quite seriously by the council. Members of the FNC complained publicly in 1983 that the constitution had been violated when the minister of education failed to respond to an FNC request for his presence at a meeting to discuss the dismissal of a number of teachers in the midst of a serious shortage of teaching staff. At a meeting in 1985, the minister of state for interior affairs presented and defended a statement on internal security matters during a closed-door session. Afterwards, the council called upon the federal government to release the federal budget,

appealed to the amirates to honour their assessed contribution to the federal budget, and called for the formation of a committee to prepare a permanent constitution. 64

A phenomenon noticeable in UAE can be called incipient populism. Debates in the most recent FNC have echoed those of Kuwait's National Assembly, with considerable concern expressed for the vulnerability of poor citizens to the economic recession. On at least one occasion, council members spoke up on behalf of expatriate government officials trapped by bureaucratic Catch-22s. 65 Such discussion provides a significant barometer of public opinion, particularly of the lower strata of the citizenry.

The existence of a National Consultative Council (NCC - al-Majlis al-Istishari al-Watani) for just the amirate of Abu Dhabi illustrates the limited penetration of the federal process in the UAE. Originally composed of 46 appointed members, the NCC was expanded to 50 members in 1983. The NCC does not enjoy the power of legislative review as does the UAE's FNC, although most legislation drafted by the Abu Dhabi Executive Council (the amirate's equivalent of a cabinet) is sent to the NCC.


Its appointees are more closely drawn from the ranks of tribal Shaykhs than the FNC. The size of the various tribes in the Abu Dhabi amirate determines the numbers of their representatives in the NCC. Hence, the ruler's appointment of new members to fill vacated seats is more in the nature of confirming tribally nominated candidates than freely selecting his own. Some in the NCC hold that this gives their body more power than the FNC, whose members serve solely at the pleasure of the seven rulers. 66

Prospect

The desired degree of political participation appears to differ considerably among member amirates. Abu Dhabians tend to regard traditional means of participation, such as direct petitioning of the ruler and principal government officials, as acceptable in what remains a strongly tribal society. Dubayyans and Sharjans, on the other hand, relatively more cosmopolitan and less tribal, may find such traditional expressions anachronistic or irrelevant. Sharjah's ruler, Shaykh Sultan ibn Muhammad al-Qasimi, has experimented with neighbourhood councils to represent the views and grievances of inhabitants to the ruler directly. 67

66. The Middle East, no.68 (June 1980), pp.29-30.
federal level, the smaller amirates may regard strengthened popular institutions as a way of abating the imbalance of power between them and Abu Dhabi.

Representative bodies were a feature of the abortive coup attempt in Sharjah in June 1987. The erstwhile usurper and brother of the ruler, Shaykh 'Abd al-Aziz Ibn Muhammad al-Qasimi, proposed a consultative council as part of his reform. In an interview, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz declared that "the UAE issues laws. The emirate issues others. Therefore, the people should participate in discussing draft laws before their issuance. The people should be represented by a consultative council elected from notables of the emirate." 68 Soon after regaining control, Shaykh Sultan established a 26-member Executive Council, composed of the heads of government departments and other individuals "selected by the ruler from among citizens known for their ability, experience, and integrity." 69 Among the council's assigned tasks were the drawing up of the amirates general policy, discussing bills and drafting decrees, considering the annual budget and the development plan, and approving oil agreements.

68. Al-Qabas (Kuwait), 19 June 1987 (FBIS, 22 June 1987).
The degree of political participation in the UAE depends on the progress of federalization. At the moment, the federal momentum in the UAE is balanced precariously between opposing forces. On the positive side, there is the homogenity of UAE society, the gradual acceptance of the UAE as a functioning entity, the growing competence of some federal institutions, and the advantages derived from membership in a larger entity. At the same time, however, the UAE experiment is endangered by continuing rivalries among the amirates, the increasing indebtedness of the poorer amirates, and the entrenched autonomy of the member states in such areas as sovereignty, defense, oil and finances.

Several combined meetings of the FNC and the cabinet in early 1979 produced a joint memorandum to the Council of Rulers, criticizing the numerous obstacles in the path of federalization. It also called for an expansion of the FNC's base in the context of endorsing democratic principles in the UAE.\textsuperscript{70} The memorandum's call for the strengthening of federal institutions, the centralization of revenues, and the full unification of the armed forces, as well as the granting of full legislative powers to the FNC, faced strong opposition from the Council of Rulers, while Shaykh Rashid of Dubai told a Kuwaiti newspaper that "a unitary state means

\textsuperscript{70} Heard-Bey, From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates (London, 1982), pp.397-401.
no borders, therefore, no rulers. It means elections, it means putting finance, revenue and decision-making in the hands of a central government". 71

Discussion of the memorandum within the Council of Rulers was accompanied by popular demonstrations for greater unification, although abrupt centralization of the UAE was rejected. This combination of uncertainties regarding succession, the future of the federal process, and strong tensions between the member states has created doubt about the growth of formal democratic institutions.

Oman

The sultanate form of government in Oman is a radical departure from the imamate, headed by elected imams of the Ibadi sect, which formed Oman's traditional government for nearly a thousand years. However, the sultans in Muscat survived various attempts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to reconstruct the imamate. Over the course of the twentieth century, the power of succeeding sultans has increased simultaneously with the diminishing influence of the rest of the ruling family. Since the demise of the imamate and reunification of the country in the 1950s, the challenges to the ruler has been virtually

71. Quoted in The Middle East, no.68 (June 1980), p.31.
non-existent. A serious rebellion in the southern province of Dhufar was put down in late 1975 after considerable fighting. To a far greater degree than elsewhere in the Gulf, Sultan Qabus clearly stood alone at the apex of authority.72

Constitutional and Legislative Development

The Sultanate of Oman's State Consultative Council (SCC - al Majlis al-Istishari lil-Dawla) is the youngest national council in the GCC.73 The concept of shura with its Islamic connotations, was an integral element in the Ibadi imamate but the newer Sultanate, based on the Al Bu Said dynasty, has never developed a tradition of consultation, let alone formal representation. Thus, the formation of a small ministerial committee by Sultan Qabus in late 1980 to


draw up plans for an assembly was unexpected. Following submission of their report, the Sultan issued decrees on 18 October 1981 establishing the SCC and appointing its members. Eickelman notes the role of the council on agriculture, fisheries, and industry, established in April 1979, in preparing the way for the later appearance of the SCC, specifically in drafting the first policy recommendations by a body "outside" the government and in gaining the support or at least neutrality of some government officials for the idea of consultation. 74

Initially, the council was composed of 43 members but was expanded to 55 in 1983. The original SCC committee is responsible for selecting the members and sending their names to the Sultan, who has accepted every nominee for all three SCC sessions. Only the SCC's president is directly chosen by the Sultan, so far for two year terms; the president always holds the rank of minister because he must have direct access to Sultan.

So far the nature of composition is concerned, nineteen members belong to the government, comprising the eleven under secretaries of the social service ministries and seven other officials nominated at large. The Chamber of Commerce elects 19 candidates from which the SCC committee chooses

74. Eickelman, n.73, p.55.
11 members. Each of the Sultanate's seven geographic regions is represented by a varying number of members according to its population size and development needs; the number ranges from seven to ten. Despite the manner of their appointment, these 25 members officially represent all of Oman. The member of the SCC guiding committee from a particular region is responsible for choosing a list of 12 candidates, from which the whole committee selects the region's representatives. During the first session, the 44 members included 24 Ibadis, 13 Sunnis, and 7 Shia. Twenty-two had received some modern education, with six having attended university; their median age was 47.75

The only permanent members are the 11 under secretaries: even the other seven government representatives can only serve for a maximum of two terms. The remaining block of 36 members, who are limited to two terms, is rotated so that one-third is replaced every term. The original intention was to provide for a greater range of participation. If a member from the interior, for example, could remain in the council indefinitely, he might be more like to join "the establishment" than represent his constituents and younger aspirants would be discouraged from seeking office themselves.

After the first two terms, the need for adjustment was recognized. To counteract the tendency of under-secretaries

75. Ibid, pp.61-63.
to act as defenders of the government, they were granted immunity and encouraged to raise criticisms of all parts of the government—except their own ministries—and indeed were forbidden to participate in issues regarding their own ministries. As a longer term remedy, the SCC committee recommended that the under-secretaries be moved around ministries and that newer, more earnest individuals be appointed regularly as under-secretaries. At the same time, it was seen that frequent and complete turnover of the other SCC members destroyed continuity and weeded out the few, capable, educated, energetic members, replacing them with less qualified people. It seemed wasteful to disenfranchise members who had developed skills in dealing with a complex government structure, evaluating development projects, and formulating policy recommendations. As a consequence, the Sultan privately informed the committee that they could reappoint a particular member for another two-year terms after he has stood down for a term. 76

Despite all this elaborate preparation, the SCC has perhaps the most restricted national council mandate in the GCC. In part, this derives from the infrequent, highly formal nature of its meetings. Only three sessions are held each year; each session lasted only three days until

76. Peterson, n.13, pp.104-5.
1985, when the period was extended to five days or a week. As originally conceived, all meetings were held in camera and the council's competence restricted to economic and social matters. Because the SCC is not in session most of the year, there is little scope for discussion and debate. Consequently, if a member wishes to raise an issue during the 48-49 weeks the SCC is not in session, he must submit a letter to the SCC's Executive Committee. This Committee may then pass the matter on to the appropriate standing committee, which returns its recommendations to the Executive Committee, which adds its own recommendations and sends it on to the appropriate ministry. The Committees have met much more regularly than the SCC as a whole.

SCC recommendations pertain to various subjects. SCC recommendations during its first session dealt with the improvement of health services, land affairs, road and high-way priorities, the marketing of agricultural products, housing, traditional fishing, encouragement of individual investments, the status of the Jabal al-Akhdar region, and studies prepared by the Board for the settlement of commercial disputes, the Tender Board and the Electricity Authority. During the following session, recommendations were concerned with changes in the banking sector, incentives for higher education, establishment of boarding schools in remote areas, expansion of post and telephone services, municipal
services outside the capital area, agricultural and livestock development, vocational training, the role of the private sector in development efforts, and review of the 1988-1990 development plan and the draft commercial law. 77

This highly restricted format has been relaxed significantly in the third term (1985-1987), and the first step toward legislative review has been introduced. Draft legislation in the economic and social fields is sent from the cabinet to the SCC for consideration in the appropriate committee, then discussed during the regular terms and recommendations voted on for despatch to the Sultan. The Sultan chooses whether to accept these recommendations or not and then passes them back to the Cabinet for its comments and implementation. In matters concerning the development plan, recommendations are sent by the Sultan to the Development Council to comment on their feasibility and then to the appropriate ministry for implementation. Theoretically, if the recommended improvement cannot be carried out at the time, perhaps for financial reasons, then the recommendation is incorporated into the Five Year Plan. It is important to note that this new legislative role does not include defense, foreign affairs, or apparently even oil, nor does it include the power of veto.

77. The State Consultative Council in Four Years, pp.24-32.
One significant development has been the end to secrecy by reporting and televising the formal sessions. This, in its modest way, appears to have laid some groundwork for an SCC role as government watchdog. Ministers are required to appear before the SCC when a matter concerning their ministry is discussed, and they must reply on the spot to valid questions put by any member of the SCC. Of course, only the heads of the social service ministries are accountable, and neither they nor the government can be put to a vote of confidence.

An Assessment

The mixing of government and non-government members raises the question of conflict of interest, not only in regard to the under-secretaries but also to the president. Because the president is head of the SCC for only two-years, he has no real stake in the consultative process. Because he is a minister, both by virtue of his personal rank and by past and future positions, he is more a member of the government than a watchdog. Another area of conflict of interest arises from the tendency of some ministers to use their official positions to advance their personal business.

It is difficult to determine whether the formation and activities of the SCC have contributed to the legitimacy of the state. In a sense, the SCC has carved out a modest
niche through the petitions submitted to it by individuals and groups of citizens, who may also question members from their region. The exclusion of such areas of government activity as defense, foreign affairs, and oil from the council's competence is defended by the government on the grounds that the SCC is too new to entrust it with such sensitive matters. Presumably, the SCC's purview may be increased in future years. Beneath it all runs the knowledge that Oman, far more than its GCC neighbours, is a one-man monarchy whose authority is virtually unchallenged by the ruling family, other notable tribal or merchant families, or even the cabinet.

**Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia has indicated its intention to establish a national council on several occasions. A precedent existed after Abd al Aziz Al Saud conquered the Hijaz in 1924, which had a relatively sophisticated population and government machinery compared to the Najd. A Consultative Council (*al-Majlis al-Ahli*) was introduced for Mecca in January 1925, with representatives of the religious leadership (*Ulama*), notables (*ajan*), and merchants — each electing delegates to the 15 member council. It was replaced six months later by a broader council with two members representing the 'ulama' one representing the merchants, and 12 each representing a
different quarter of the city; another three members were appointed by the King. Similar councils were announced for the Hijazi cities of the al-Madina, Jidda, al-Taif, and Yanbu, and these councils together with Key tribal shaykhs were to elect the members of a General Consultative Council.

These plans were superseded by the actions of the new viceroy, Amir (later King) Faysal. A Constituent Assembly composed of eight elected and five appointed members, was charged with writing a constitution for the Hijaz, and the resultant "Basic Instructions for the Hijaz" was published on 3 September 1926. This constitutional document provided for the establishment of a Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura) for the Hijaz and a number of city and village councils.

After further amendment of the Basic Instructions, the Consultative Council was formed in July 1927, with four members chosen in consultation with prominent members of the community, another four appointed by the government, and the viceroy as Chairman. Its mandate included reviewing budgetary questions, new projects, and other economic matters and the enactment of laws and statutes. Further changes a year later eliminated the stipulations on consulting community members for some appointments and the necessity of including the Najdis. Its size was increased to 20 members in 1952 and to 25 in 1955. The Consultative Council was joined by a
council of Deputies, essentially a mini-cabinet for the Hijaz, in 1931. The two Hijazi councils continued to administer the affairs of that region until the formation of a Kingdom-wide Council of Ministers in October 1953. Although this action made the Council of Deputies superfluous, the Consultative Council continued to meet thrice-weekly into the 1970s.\(^78\)

In the last several decades, efforts have been made to form a Consultative Council. The proposed Organic Law of 1960, an attempt to create a formal constitution for the Kingdom, included provisions for a council. The National Council (al-Majlis al-Watani) was to consist of 120 members, with 40 to be appointed and 80 indirectly elected through nomination by provincial councils and approved by a committee of 10 appointed by the King.\(^79\) King Faisal announced a resurrection of the Old Consultative Council as part of his reform package announced in November 1962.\(^80\) There were indications that the idea was being considered prior to the assassination of King Faisal in March 1975, and a policy

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79. Solaïm, n.78, pp.77-79.

statement following the accession of Khalid ibn Abd al-Aziz as King declared that a council, to be composed of about 70 members drawn from professional and official ranks, would be established in two months time. The issue was raised again in the aftermath of the occupation of Mecca's Great Mosque in January 1980, and a council was promised within two months. The proposed council came within a framework of constitutional reform, which also contemplated a constitution of 200 articles based on the Quran and Sunna.

Finally, King Fahd ibn Abd al-Aziz announced in a 1984 interview that he intended to create the Consultative Council as well as provide a written constitution. A committee headed by Amir Nayif ibn Abd al-Aziz, the interior minister, had presented its recommendations in early 1984, but the decision had been delayed by the opposition of some of the Al-Saud and religious interests. But the King stated that the council was to be set up in another "three or four months", initially with an appointed membership. The Plan envisaged indirect elections after several years for about half the members through provincial assemblies, and

81. The Middle East, no.13 (November 1975).
later direct elections for some or all of the membership. Further hints emerged a few months later that the Council was on its way, that its members would be chosen from 14 elected regional councils, and that it functions would include approving the budget, discussing laws, and questioning government officials. 83 This was followed by the construction of the King's office, Council of Ministers, and Assembly Complex in Riyadh. King Fahd, on the eve of his 1987 visit to London, once again affirmed that the assembly would be established soon. 84

In part, the failure to carry through on repeated promises may have been prompted by a reluctance to experiment during trying external circumstances, specifically the Iran-Iraq war. At the same time, there seems to have been considerable concern that an elected assembly might be dominated by Islamics and made unworkable. There was little concern that an opposition bloc of secular ideologues would appear, as in Kuwait or as feared in the past. But deeper, however, was the underlying fear that public debate would accentuate regional divisions; in this view, there still is no true Saudi, only Najdis, Hijazis, and Asiris tied together by the Al Saud. Observers also noted the strength of

tribalism and the inability of people even within a region or village to get along, as well as the danger of public criticism of individuals in a society in which such criticism is equated with an attack on ones' honour.\textsuperscript{85}

The Functions of National Councils

By now the national councils have become necessary, functional institutions in the Gulf states for a number of reasons. First, societies and the political and governmental structure have become more complex. There are more constituencies to satisfy, including minorities and the emerging middle class. Second, expectations have changed. Changing expectations in the context of the 1980s means a more independent role for the national councils from control or manipulation by ruling families. Third, while traditional aspects of Gulf societies and politics remain strong, subtle but intensifying modifications in the political structure require the reformulation of the basis of legitimacy.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the national councils of the Gulf are not entirely rubber-stamp bodies, completely dominated and controlled by the head of state or a small elite group, whether the ruling family or

a party organization. Instead, they fulfill real and necessary functions, even if their power and responsibility fall far short of similar bodies in Western democracies. The functions they provide can be summarized as follows:

(i) The Legitimation of the Regime as a "Democracy"

The Gulf states require new or supplementary manifestations of their legitimacy in the face of rapid, drastic changes. But the actions of the ruling families in Kuwait and Bahrain leave their commitment to constitutionalism open to question. Currently, the political system of the GCC constitute a transitional stage between traditional authority (with the ruling families' right to rule based on their social standing in a tribal milieu, their long legacy of leadership, and their record of protection of the community and maintenance of law and order), and acquired authority (based on merit and popular support, with leaders serving as the chosen agents of the people in whom sovereignty resides).

(ii) A Formalised Majlis

Currently, the utility of the majlis has often been reduced to a ceremonial function of paying ones' respects to the ruler or governor, petitioning him for a favour or redress of grievance or receiving foreign visitors. Even where the informal majlis is maintained as a casual conclave
among friends and associates, its usefulness has been eroded by the growing size and complexity of Gulf societies, with their increasing demands upon the individuals time and the decline of traditional social courtesies (such as daily calls upon family elders and community notables). 

The councils are an attempt to preserve the traditional function of the majlis, by providing leading representatives of the community with a public forum for discussing important issues and providing the ruler and the government with advice and recommendations. This is illustrated most clearly in Qatar's Advisory Council and Abu Dhabi's National Consultative Council. The more political change occurs, however, the less relevant this function is likely to become.

(iii) The Legislative Role

In the GCC states, the legislative work carried out by the national council has been limited to legislative review, rather than the initiation of major legislation. The extent of review has varied widely. In Kuwait, near-absolute review has been mandated both by the constitution and by the expectations engendered by history and recent experience. On the other hand, review in the Consultative Councils is

more of a privilege extended by the ruler, or a tool to give
a public impression of broader participation in the policy-
making process, than a right. All the national assemblies
and Consultative Councils have exercised the right to question
members of government, although the Prime Ministers and
portfolio-carrying members of ruling families have been
sacrosanct everywhere except Kuwait. The principle of
a vote of no-confidence has been an issue only in Kuwait,
although never formally invoked. There have been at least
two isolated instances of a ruler's veto or decree being
overridden: the decision to ban all alcohol in Kuwait,
including within embassies, and the rejection of a pension
decree in Qatar.

(iv) Government Accountability

The creation of complex, unfamiliar, and often ineffi-
cient bureaucracies has prompted national councils to question
criticize, and force governments to executive corrections
or changes in general policies and the specific actions of
government agencies. Kuwait alone has seen an actual carry-
through in its holdings the heads of agencies, i.e., cabinet
members, responsible for their own actions as well as those
of their agencies.

More indirectly, the deliberations and decisions of
national councils can provide an informal referendum on the
government as a whole. This generally goes on further than the cautious expression of comments regarding the quality of life. But the tenor of assemblies in Kuwait and Bahrain, particularly in the vocal opposition provided by leftist members, has served to highlight divisions over the right of the ruling families and their allies to dominate politics and the economy. This again was a large part of the reason that prompted the last dissolution of the Kuwaiti National Assembly.

(v) Incipient Populism

National Councils provide a convenient safety valve for the expression of opinion and grievances. The function is reinforced by their member's role in receiving constituents' requests for assistance and petitions that are introduced in the body or its Committees. From another angle, it has become acceptable to criticize aspects of government policy as a way of gaining public attention or support. In the case of Kuwait's elected body nearly all elected members have demonstrated a proclivity for playing to the grandstand. This includes not only the demonstrable opposition but the tribalists as well. In addition, national councils are more than just a safety valve, but a formal substitute for traditional participation. They directly serve the interests of the state because they serve as forums for the
expression of views desired by the state, and the state
is able to control the expression of views in the context of
assemblies easily.

Generally, however, speaking out in the name of
the people is done with caution and often is done with
ulterior motives. The speaker not only seeks credibility
with a popular constituency but often with the government
as well. As a consequence, many members will praise the
government for all it has provided and only then ask for a
specific improvement, such as a well or school, or inquire
why a promised project has been delayed.

(vi) The Legitimation of Political Participation
by Minority or Non-Elite Groups

Traditionally power has been shared by ruling families,
the shaykhs of important allied tribes, and prominent
merchants. Other groups of lesser standing were excluded
from a say in policy-making. More recently, however, they
have participated fully in national councils, either through
the election of representatives from the group or through
the deliberate allocation of seats for them by the ruler.
Groups that have benefitted in this manner include the
bedouin; the Shia, the Liwatiya and Baluch in Oman, and to
a lesser extent, the UAE; and the educated, the technocrats,
or the emerging middle class.
Prospect of Democratic Institutions

The vital question regarding the GCC states is can formal national councils serve as legitimate forums for criticism or can they serve as catalysts for pluralism. In reviewing the failure to institute electoral bodies in Bahrain and Qatar, Emile Nakhleh has noted the argument that "participatory government and continued authoritarian family rule are by definition contradictory. Sharing in government requires both rights and responsibilities as well as a sincere commitment to the spirit of compromise." He goes on to note that "for democracy to function effectively at least three basic conditions must be fulfilled: the relationship between the government and the governed must be clearly defined; democracy must be recognized as a right that belongs to the people, rather than being a gift from the ruler; and the process must become institutionalized and not subject to the whim of any one ruler or any one ruling family."  

Clearly, the governments of the GCC states are not democratic in the sense that West European and the US

87. Nakhleh, n.51, p.174
88. Ibid, p.175.
governments are. It would be a mistake, however, to regard these states as autocratic, repressive, or anachronistic. Instead of being relics from the past, all six governments have made drastic adaptations to changing circumstances and expectations. As such, they represent transitional stages in the path of political evolution from traditional to modern societies.

At the same time, the more evolving circumstances require even more radical political transformation. Such key democratic institutions as national councils are likely to be increasingly necessary as time goes on, particularly as growing populations and faster-paced lifestyles result in less personal contact between citizens, governments become more complex, access to rulers and ruling families decreases, and informal participation through radical means, such as the majlis, or modern means, such as policy-influencing positions within the bureaucracy, loses relevance or possibility.

The Gulf regimes appear to be cognizant of this necessity, even as they regard it ambiguously. Amir Jabir of Kuwait, in announcing dissolution of the National Assembly, declared that "real democracy stems from the principles of shura. It is a dialogue with an aim, wise cooperation, understanding, and decision." As Amir Talal ibn Abd al-Aziz

al-Saud remarked in 1986, the Arab World cannot advance "one step" in the absence of democratic freedoms, because progress and prosperity come through democratic life. What is to be feared is that the GCC could become "just another Arab League" if "Gulf citizens are not involved in council meetings, deliberations and resolutions."\(^\text{90}\)

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\(^\text{90. Quoted in }\)Saudi Arabia Newsletter, 26 May 1986.