



Saudi Arabia and the Challenge of GCC Expansion

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Executive Summary

Saudi Arabia's drive to extend Gulf Cooperation Council membership to Jordan and Morocco is the latest attempt to prevent pro-democracy demonstrations expanding to the Gulf. It also represents a direct challenge to so far timid attempts in European capitals to move away from backing regional autocracies – a high-risk and high-cost strategy which has directly contributed to the region's democratic uprisings and instability in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya – towards a more sustainable long-term strategy supporting inclusive development and political reform. Although there are undeniable short-term gains for European states in supporting these anti-democratic policies, these are far outweighed by the medium- to long-term benefits of moving towards a more politically and economically sustainable strategy reconciling European values and interests.

Issues

The build-up to Egypt's first post-revolutionary constitutional referendum has been fraught with controversy. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was first accused by some of hijacking the democratic reformist spirit of the uprising by appointing a panel of (unrepresentative and conservative) Constitutional experts to amend the constitution instead of allowing the formation of a Constitutional Assembly which would re-write Egypt's Constitution from scratch. The amendments, pushed through in what many feared would be a rushed process lasting only ten years, were criticized for retaining some of the old Constitution's restrictions (e.g. Art. 2's specification that the president must be a Muslim male).

Some groups – particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, extremist Salafis, and the remnants of the NDP – attempted to portray the referendum as a vote of confidence in them as political groups, provoking much debate about the rise of Islamists in post-revolutionary vacuum and fears of an 'Islamist Dilemma' in European capitals. Many of the civil society and labour organisations which were crucial in organising and conducting the uprising, particularly early on, however, called for a 'No' vote as a way of putting pressure on the SCAF for quicker and deeper reforms, particularly the election of a President, after which a constituent process would draft a constitution ex novo.

However, this broad split between socially and politically conservative leaderships on the one hand and the progressive liberals and leftists on the other did not reflect the split of Egyptian society. There were many liberals and leftists who disagreed with their leaderships, while the progressive youth in the Muslim Brotherhood – which had been equally central to the early days of the revolution, against their leadership's explicit orders – were unhappy about the process and content of the constitutional amendments.

Keywords

Gulf Cooperation Council, Middle East, Jordan, Morocco, United States, Europe, Democracy

Quotables

- The GCC's expansion constitutes a direct challenge to democratic reform movements throughout the Arab world, but also to Western governments and to the EU in particular
- The GCC justifies its offers to include Jordan and Morocco citing education, trade, tourism and fisheries, but it is clear they are offering a trade: oil and debt relief, for crackdowns on pro-democracy movements.
- The GCC is attempting to stabilize the region, to avoid uprisings spreading to the Gulf.
- The accession of Jordan and Morocco to the GCC raises the stakes for the US and European governments. Backing democracy now has a price tag: Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

After the crackdown in Bahrain and massive handouts to buy off support in Saudi Arabia, the GCC's expansion to include Jordan and Morocco is a step change in Saudi Arabia's attempt to crush pro-democracy movements across the region, not least by raising the cost of already shaky Western support for these movements.



the transitional period's instability to intervene permanently in Egyptian politics. For these two segments of the population, a 'yes' vote was a politically cautious, but nonetheless progressive choice.

Much more important than even the outcome of the referendum is the fact that the first free vote in Egypt's republican history was held at all, and that it went off largely without incidents, unlike elections under Mubarak. Most significant of all was the turnout: for the first time voter turnout was actually measured officially, coming out at around 41% nation-wide. Previously, the turnout was not counted officially, only estimated. Even then, the regime's most optimistic figures would put turnout at around 25%, while opposition groups like the Judges Club often – and more realistically – estimated around 5%, and the UN estimated just under 20%.

Implications

The process and result of the referendum has been welcomed cautiously by European governments. A recurring concern appears to be with the possible 'Islamisation' of Egypt.

Options

At stake in for Egypt during this transition are its political but also economic direction. The implications of this trajectory for the international community are considerable, and the posture of both the US and European governments will significantly influence Egypt's fortunes over the next year in particular. Politically, the international community's options range from maintaining its historical priority of stability and security over democracy, through conditional support for specified electoral outcomes (e.g. ostracising the Muslim Brotherhood), to unconditional support for the democratic process.

Recommendations

Conditional support ought to be broadly discounted, short of the emergence of political forces which would renege on fundamental human rights. The political costs of attempts to ostracise if not prevent the emergence of Islamist forces in particular cannot be underestimated: whenever this has been attempted – whether in the case of radical organisations such as Hamas or Hizballah, or more moderate groups such as Algeria's FIS or the AKP in Turkey – it has resulted in long-term political blowback. European states should provide unconditional endorsement of both the process of democratic elections and their outcome. This will bolster the prospects for democratic transition within Egypt, helping stabilise the country both economically and politically. It will also reinforce the EU's reputation – currently precarious, from an Egyptian standpoint – for democratic values, and commensurately increase Europe's 'soft power' and its regional influence, with potentially positive outcomes for the Mediterranean's regional stability.

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