

**Civil Society and Democracy
In the Gulf Region**

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Introduction: The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and The United Arab Emirates, has distinctive features as a sub-region within the Arab world. The six Gulf states have undergone social and economic changes since oil was discovered in the 1930s and 1940s. The most drastic changes have taken place in the last three decades after the sharp increase in oil revenues in mid 1970s. Oil brought new forces, which restructured political life. The most important impact of oil and the economy it produced was that it gave rulers direct access to external resources, money that were generated outside the local economy.(1)

The Gulf states have a combined population of more than 32.8 million people in 2003 (Saudi Arabia 22.5 million- Bahrain 712,000- Qatar 624,000- Kuwait 2.4 million- United Arab Emirates 1 million- Oman 2.6 million. As a result of the vast economic development, foreign labour in the six GCC states increased dramatically. Recent statistics reveal that the GCC labour force jumped from 2 million in 1975 to nearly 9.4 million in 2003.

Although the Gulf states have a number of factors in common such as language, culture and socio-economic similarities, they still differ in their degree of development. As an example, Bahrain has started public education in 1919, followed by Kuwait (1921), Qatar (1954), UAE (1955), Saudi Arabia (1960) and Oman (1970).

In 2004, per capita income in the GCC states ranged from US \$ 9327 in Saudi Arabia to \$ 32945 in Qatar, relative to the world average of \$ 5,148. While per capita income measures a country's well being, three other development indicators all show strong correlation with education; fertility and infant mortality show strong negative correlation with education and positive correlation with life expectancy. The GCC states launched massive human resource development strategies in the last three decades targeting health and educational improvement, which resulted in a significant population growth. Such improvement in health, medical care and nutrition contributed to a demographic transition characterized by sharp decline in the infant mortality rate and a higher life expectancy

at birth, which rose dramatically. The life expectancy at birth has increased considerably to above 70 years in all GCC states.

In all the six states, the tribal political system is headed by a ruler who retains absolute power. Political participation does not exist in any Gulf state except in Kuwait and partially in Bahrain. In Saudi Arabia, the ultimate law is derived from the Quran and the sovereignty resides in the King, whereas in Oman there is partial election. In the UAE and Qatar, the National Assembly members are appointed by the ruler; no elections have ever been held in either state except for municipal election which were conducted in Qatar in recent years, however, Qatar issued a constitution and promised to hold elections in the near future.

Non-governmental organizations such as professional associations, cultural clubs and trade unions are very recent in the Gulf states. Political parties are banned all over the region except in Bahrain where 14 political societies exist at present and party formation might be developed soon. It is only indirectly, through the medium of non-political organizations and institutions, that political change can be channeled. The number of such organizations is growing. In general, a large number of those organizations are often organized by the state, run by ruling families or elite members and dominated by family relations. However, few remain independent, autonomous and self sustained.

NGOs in the Gulf states:

NGOs have many advantages in comparison to governmental organizations. They can be flexible and swift in dealing with new needs and problems, since they reflect both private and popular initiatives. Also, they are part of the local social fabric, and their capabilities are even greater when they are grassroots organizations. They can be more efficient than government bureaucratic programmes, can more easily assess the local needs, and can cope with the problems on a daily basis. They are better able to evaluate the poor and the needy and approach them directly. They are also capable of mobilizing human and financial resources on the local level to offer necessary help. Finally, such organizations, through their movements and activities, strengthen civic spirit and positively influence social cohesion.

Organized social work in the Gulf region is more recent. Bahrain spearheaded such voluntary work in 1919, followed by Kuwait (1923), and then the rest came in the 60s, 70s, and 80s as in the case of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman and Qatar. In 2002, the total number of women's

societies is estimated at 69 ; 10 of which are in Bahrain; 6 in the UAE; 5 in Kuwait; 29 in Oman and 19 in Saudi Arabia. As for professional associations for the same year, the total number has reached 84; 31 in Bahrain; 19 in the UAE; 19 in Kuwait; 8 in Oman. Charitable societies in the 2001 are estimated at 37; 6 in Bahrain; 9 in the UAE; 8 in Kuwait; 11 in Saudi Arabia.

NGO organizations have varied according to their activities and from one state to the other. As an example, charitable/religious and women's societies are active in Saudi Arabia, while professional organizations become non-existent, on the other hand, in Oman, such NGOs appear only within the activities of women's societies. In Qatar, this is restricted to 3 NGOs; the Society for Care of the Handicapped, the Qatar Red Crescent Society and the Qatar Charitable society.

Kuwait, Bahrain and UAE have wider field of voluntary associations, which varied according to their activities. As for Oman, social activities are restricted to 29 women's societies spreaded over the various regions of the Sultanate, in addition to the Omani Society for the Care of the Handicapped Children. It is not allowed to set up any charitable societies of any religious or professional nature, for fear of mixing their benevolent or professional programs with political activities, for this, may lead to undesirable matters of political security. The same applies to Qatar, which lacks in professional and women's associations, where women's activities feature in the women's branch of Qatar Red Crescent society, and more recently through the supreme council for the family which is a government institution. Whereas cultural activities are confined to lectures and seminars conducted by the Jasra Cultural and Sport Club. In 2004 Qatar passed a law allowing the establishment of professional organizations. The same was done for labor unions, allowing for the first time for the right to strike and industrial actions. This makes Qatar the third GCC state to issue such laws after Kuwait and Bahrain.

In Kuwait and Bahrain politics seem to overlap with civil activities. In Kuwait the Salafis (altra conservative sunnis) have an enormous clout where they can push their agenda via their members in parliament, mainly the question of American Forces presence on their land, political reforms initiatives proposed by the US administration, and women's political participation. This gave rise to the controversy over the segregation of the sexes in education and in public life as banning singing and dancing in hotels and restaurants, together with the "reform" of the educational system. These issues gave rise to a clash among the political and social

forces, as well as provide a fertile environment for the fatwas (religious decrees).(2)

On the other hand, the Islamic forces of the Shia faith in Bahrain, being the more influential in size and weight, have managed to impose their political programmes on the opposition. This is personified in the Wifaq National Islamic Society, which managed to muster some of the liberals, leftist and Arab nationalist elements as well as some of lesser Shia organizations such as the Shirazis. Their common cause is focused on the constitutional reforms that are the subject of great dispute between the government and the opposition. There is also the matter of confrontation between the state and the Women's associations, regarding the formation of federation for women.(3)

In the UAE, civil society organizations have witnessed a dramatic increase in recent years. Table 1 clarifies the diversification of objectives sought after by such societies, whether women's, religious, professional or cultural. Statistics in this table reflect the variety of their activities as well as their differences due to geographical distribution over the whole country in comparison with other groupings. Abu Dhabi takes the major share as they number 33 with a percentage of 32% of the total. Dubai takes second place with 25 associations, ie 24.3% of the total. Sharjah is the third (17), and 19.5%; Ras Al-Khaimah (13) – 12.6%; the rest (Ajman, Fujairah & Um-Alqaiween) share the remainder equally. Apart from foreign societies (17) which serve expatriates, professional associations come second in number (15 societies or 14.6% of the total). Cultural and human service societies come third (11 societies or 10.7% of the total)(4)

As for Bahrain, the number of NGOs is estimated at 391 in 2005, serving various ethnic groups and sections of the society. Table 2 indicates that the number of social organizations totals 75. They are active in various spheres related to women, charity, religious and professional fields. Other activities are directed to expatriate communities that have settled in Bahrain and are largely mutual-assistance funds rather than organizations. Professional, women and religious organizations in Bahrain are the most active and have large membership bases. Women's and religious organizations tend to focus more on support services with emphasis on women's legal rights in the case of women's organizations and on social and religious activities in the case of religious organizations. Professional organizations are oriented to serve the particular members of the specific profession with minimum contact with other social segments. However, lawyers, a possible exception, are more involved in social problems.(5)

Furthermore, Bahrain has seen an incredible increase and spread in the number of grass-roots charitable funds organized by the private sector. While in 1993 the country had only six charity funds, by the end of 2005 it had 41. The purpose of these funds is to provide communal financing for local needs and services, whether for households or individuals. They are meant to supplement the meager resources of individuals by offering a temporary financial boost through the participation of the local community all sharing in the particular fund. The remarkable phenomenon has spread mainly among the villages and to the poorest strata of society. It is clear that these funds are a response by the rural poor to fill the gap in needed services that are denied them through official neglect. Obviously, these funds represent the efforts by grass-roots organizations to satisfy the needs of the people, and as a result, they replace the state in providing funds, services and refuge. Such a development carries a very serious message to the authorities, since the poorer elements of the population are actively seeking solutions that depend on sources other than the state.(6)

In Kuwait, the number of cooperative societies has reached 42, with more than 170,000 members, who control more than 80% of the retail food market. These institutions have begun to assume a large political importance; they formed the basis of the self-help network that arose during the Iraqi occupation in 1990. These Kuwaiti groups resisted the occupation and tended to the daily needs of the population, by supplying food, medical care, and basic services. As for women's associations in Kuwait (Five associations), they are controlled and funded by the state as they are in Bahrain; yet they have elected boards, written constitutions, and paid membership. Kuwait's Law 24 of 1962, governing the activity of associations, gives the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour full control over voluntary associations.(7) Two major developments occurred after the Gulf War: first, the majority of women's organizations shifted their concerns toward serving the community; then, in 1994, a fifth organization; the Federation of Kuwaiti Women's associations was established as the sole representative for all the Kuwaiti women's associations. All but one association (the Women's cultural and social society) joined the federation that calls on women to press for implementation of the Shari'a and to comply with Arab and Islamic traditions.(8) Al-Mughni observes that there is strong resistance on the part of the state, the male community and the elitist upper-class women to allow any changes in women's status. Two women's associations (Women cultural & social society (WCSS) and the Girls club) support suffrage for women and, since the early 1980s, have campaigned for political rights; but they have made no effort to form a coalition. This

lack of unity has undermined the women's political rights movement and has raised doubts on the commitment of women's groups to win the vote for women.(9) Only recently and with effort of Kuwaiti government, Women in Kuwait have won the suffrage.

Conclusion

How do we measure the growth of civil society in any one country? . Methods to measure that growth might be through assessing the increase in the number of groups, and the number of participating members, in the resources available to them, and in the degree of autonomy from the state. As mentioned earlier, the number of organizations of civil society has increased dramatically all over the Gulf region in recent years. Most of these organizations are searching for different strategies for change cutting across the entire social strata. They play an important role performed by political systems such as representing the interests of the people and recruiting leaders. These associations reflect the social and political changes that have taken place in the Gulf. They also represent a new social force that might be developed to bring changes in the future. The final question to be raised is whether the Gulf states would survive in an increasingly modern society while denying its citizens legal and constitutional equality.

Some of the obstacles faced by these states are included in the characteristics of civil society in the Gulf region. GCC states have not yet fulfilled the basic requirements that constitute civil society. Furthermore, the institutions of civil society within the GCC are dominated by the socio-religious character, compared with the associations of cultural and intellectual nature. This has led to a diminishing, if not total absence of civic society's politically oriented institutions

As a result, such changes that accompanied the modernization process, whether, at the level of infrastructure or basic services such as education, health and housing, lead to the strengthening and prosperity of civil society institutions. Albeit such institutions bearing the socio-religious character and the weakness, if not the total absence, of political character. This is not confined to the subject matter of the GCC countries, but seems to cover the rest of the Arab region in general where independence from the state is non-existent. On the contrary, the state has succeeded in transforming the civic society institutions to organizations performing as an extension to the state apparatus. This situation is a natural consequence to the central role played by the state in forming this social, economic,

political and cultural infrastructure within each country, encouraged by the weakness of civil society organizations on the other side.(10)

The abilities of such societies to assert their recommendations in this respect remain limited for the decision-makers in the region. It is possible to observe the factors that limit the abilities of such associations in the Gulf as follows: First, their absolute dependence on the state, i.e. the ministries of Labour and Social Affairs. Furthermore, they are not allowed to receive financial support from outside, even if it comes from international organizations. What these societies need is first, to have their financial affairs taken away from the state alone and left to their own discretion and responsibility, as is the case of similar societies in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, where financial affairs are managed by them directly and where most support comes from outside. Second, to abolish all the varied laws that hinder the functioning of the societies and render their efforts fruitless and ineffective in the decision making process.

We cannot deny that there is quest for reform in general, but specifically in the political sphere. This has acquired a new impetus since the terrorist attack on the US in 9\112001. Only then did the West seem to admit that the Arab Region urgently needed drastic reforms which they could materialize to their natural benefit. This has been manifested in the MEPI (Middle East Partnership Initiative- USA) and The Forum for the Future initiative, which is a cooperative effort by the states of Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) region, the Group of Eight (G8) industrialized nations and other partners. Despite their partial failure so far to fulfil their objectives, the question being raised, however, is whether this wave of reform a solid program or simply a passing whim. Before answering this question we have to bring out some facts that are relevant to the Arabs and Islamic societies. First, are reform initiatives have been characterized by partial and incomplete vision, this impairing the ability to forecast the future. These societies have failed to disengage their politics from their religion, which left all the main issues in question unresolved. Real reform can materialize in a complete spectrum of legislation that makes it a process tangible and workable to all.

Endnotes

- 1) Jil Crystal, Oil & Politics in the Gulf: Rulers & Merchants in Kuwait & Qatar, Cambridge University, 1990, P.6
- 2) Baqir An-najjar, “Civil Society in the Gulf, 2004”, the Gulf in 2004, Gulf Center for Research, Dubai, UAE, 2005. P. 120 (Arabic)
- 3) Ibid, P. 120
- 4) Moza Ghubash & Muhammad Ebrahim, Civil Society & Development in the GCC States: The Case Of UAE, Al-Ittihad newspaper, 30\4\2000, (Arabic), P. 29
- 5) Human Development Report, State of Bahrain, Achievements & challenges of Human Development, UNDP, 1998, P. 106
- 6) Munira A. Fakhro, Civil Society & the Democratization Process in Bahrain, (Arabic), Ibn-Khaldoun & Al-Amin Publication, Cairo, 1995, P. 108
- 7) Haya Al-Mughni, Middle East Report, No. 198,, Vol. 26, No. 1, January-March, 1996, XVI. 34
- 8) Ibid, P. 35
- 9) Ibid, P. 35
- 10) Moza Ghubash & Muhammad Ebrahim, Civil Society & Development in the GCC States: The Case of UAE, Al-Ittihad newspaper, 30\4\2000, (Arabic), P. 29

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Table (1)

Number, percentage & distribution of associations in the UAE

| No. | Emirates | Abu-Dhabi | Dubai | Sharjah | Ajman | Um-Alq aiween | Ras Al Khaimah | Fujairah | Total | % |
|-----|-------------------|-----------|-------|---------|-------|---------------|----------------|----------|-------|------|
| 1 | Women | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | 9 | 8.7 |
| 2 | Religious | -- | 1 | -- | 1 | -- | 1 | -- | 3 | 2.9 |
| 3 | Professional | 2 | 6 | 7 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 15 | 14.6 |
| 4 | Human services | 1 | 5 | 1 | -- | 1 | 1 | 1 | 10 | 9.7 |
| 5 | Cultural | 3 | 6 | 1 | -- | -- | -- | 1 | 11 | 10.7 |
| 6 | Theatres | 4 | 1 | 2 | -- | 1 | 1 | 1 | 10 | 9.7 |
| 7 | Folklore | 4 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 9 | 2 | 28 | 27.2 |
| 8 | Foreign societies | 15 | 1 | -- | 1 | -- | -- | -- | 17 | 16.5 |
| | Total | 33 | 25 | 17 | 5 | 5 | 13 | 5 | 103 | 100 |

Source: Ministry of Labour & Social affairs, 1998, UAE

Table (2)
NGOs in Bahrain by number & activities, Aug. 2005

| No. | Activities |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------|
| 15 | Women's societies |
| 11 | Associations for special care (ex. handicapped) |
| 9 | Charitable societies |
| 3 | Religious |
| 19 | Professional |
| 4 | Gulf Associations (Regional) |
| 78 | Expatriate societies & clubs |
| 41 | Charitable funds |
| 49 | Professional |
| | Total 391 |

Source: Ministry of Labor & Social Affairs, Bahrain, Aug. 2005