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Revolt in the Middle East: Arab monarchies next?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The ever sharper sectarian divide between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in the Middle East constitutes the Achilles heel of Gulf monarchies like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. They have been resisting political reforms and seeking to insulate themselves from the wave of popular protests that have swept the region for the past two years.

Commentary

ARAB MONARCHS pride themselves on having so far largely managed widespread discontent in their countries with a combination of financial handouts, artificial job creation, social investment and in the cases of Jordan and Morocco, some constitutional reform. Yet, in the shadow of the escalating civil war in Syria, it is monarchies like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Jordan that are on the cusp of the region's convoluted transition from autocracy to more open political systems.

To be sure, the situations in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Jordan differ substantially from one another. Yet, individually and taken together they feed the worst fear of monarchs and their Western backers: a successful popular revolt in one monarchy will open the door to serious challenges to autocratic royal rule in the rest of the region's mostly energy-rich monarchies. And underlying the differing circumstances is a deeply felt sense of social, economic and political disenfranchisement of the people that fuels the discontent in all three nations.

Playing the sectarian card

A 26-year old Shiite in the Eastern Province, the oil-rich heartland of Saudi Arabia, has come to symbolise the threat to the kingdom's ruling family. Khalid al-Labad, who was on a wanted list because of his willingness to protest in a country that bans all demonstrations, was killed last month by security forces as he sat on a plastic chair in front of his house in silent protest in the rundown town of Awamiya. Two of his teenage relatives also died in the attack. Their death brought to 16 the number of people killed in the last year in clashes between protesters and security forces.

As in Bahrain last year before the ruling family opted for the sectarian card and brutally cracked down on calls for reform, protesters in the Eastern Province are only calling for equal opportunity in employment, an end to religious discrimination, as well as the release of political prisoners, and not the departure of the ruling Al Saud family.

In Bahrain, the minority Sunni Al Khalifa monarchy succeeded in temporarily crushing mass protests by the majority Shiites and driving them out of the capital Manama. However the frustration and anger in Bahrain continues to bubble to the surface in protests mostly in villages on the Gulf island more than a year after the Saudi-backed crackdown. Two teenaged Shias killed in recent weeks symbolised the popular unrest.

The deaths of the teenagers highlight the failure of Bahrain and Saudi rulers to recognise that their protests were rooted in an increasing unwillingness to accept discriminatory domestic policies and attitudes fuelled by the demand for social, economic and political dignity sweeping the region, rather than the product of agent provocateurs sent by predominantly Shiite Iran. Their deaths also highlights the rulers' failure to learn the lessons of the revolts last year that toppled the leaders of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen and the resilience of Syrians in confronting a regime whose brutality overshadows anything the Middle East and North Africa has witnessed in the last two years. Brutality no longer intimidates, it fuels dissent and the resolve to defy it.

Like in Bahrain where the crackdown has produced even deeper resentment, investment in housing and other social projects in the Eastern Province has done little to quell anger that increasingly is turning violent. Protests are staged virtually every weekend in Awamiya and other towns in the region.

Benefit of the doubt

At first glance, resource-poor Jordan, although economically weaker than the Gulf states and far more threatened by multiple conflicts on its borders, has a marked advantage compared to either Saudi Arabia or Iran. It has no significant Shiite population, no ability to blame its domestic woes on an Iranian bogeyman and a monarch who has nominally embraced the notion of reform and refrained from calling in the security forces in responding to expressions of dissent.

Yet, Jordan this month witnessed the largest demonstration in demand of political and economic reform and an end to corruption since the eruption in December 2010 of mass demonstrations that swept across the region from the Gulf to the Atlantic coast of Africa. Jordanian King Abdullah's failure to truly address widespread concerns among both the tribal and Palestinian components of his population is reflected in the appointment of its fourth prime minister in 20 months. So is his insistence to hold elections in January on the basis of an election law that prompted the resignation earlier this year of one of his prime ministers, rather than responding to popular calls for true electoral reform.

Nonetheless, King Abdullah, like his namesake in Saudi Arabia, continues to enjoy the benefit of the doubt; an asset Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifah has wasted. "Our regime is good at talking about reform. As for reform itself, it still has a long way to go... there is still hope. In our monarchical system, reform is possible, and we have a history of reform that we can build upon," said Jordanian activist Zaki Bani Rashid in a commentary in *The Guardian* earlier this month.

The facts on the ground decry the notion that Middle Eastern and North African revolts threaten republics rather than monarchies. That is true only if monarchs leverage the one real asset they have as opposed to the republican leaders who have so far been deposed: a degree of legitimacy that persuades the disgruntled to give them the benefit of the doubt provided they truly address real concerns rather than hide behind security forces.

Bahrain is a revolt in waiting calling for regime change; Saudi Arabia is heading for a similar fate in its economically most vital eastern region while Jordan has taken the first step but not the second on the road to reform.

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