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Book review: "After the Sheikhs. The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies"

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Christopher M. Davidson, *After the Sheikhs. The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*

(London: Hurst, 2012), pp. 224, ISBN 978-1-84904-189-8

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A common wisdom among analysts and observers of the six monarchies of the Persian Gulf is that they are an island of stability in a chaotic Middle East. Their capacity to resist the ‘Arab Spring’ turmoil is often given as an argument for the idea that, among Arab countries, monarchies resist better than republics and that hydrocarbon rich states are more robust than non-rentier or poor rentier states. Published in the year following the ‘Arab Spring’, the book authored by Christopher Davidson takes the opposing view. The central thesis is indeed that the stability of the Gulf monarchies is only an illusion that will soon be dispelled and that these countries, because of weaknesses that are “deep-rooted, structural, and seemingly unsolvable” (p. 111), will collapse in a near future.

In order to support his argument, the author first analyses the ‘survival strategies’ of the Gulf regimes, distinguishing between domestic and external factors. While he takes into account the rentier political economy of the region which, in the existing literature, is most often put forward as a major explanatory factor behind the peculiarities of the Gulf monarchies’ ruling bargain, he does not stop at socio-economic factors but analyses other types of legitimation strategies, like the personality cult developed by rulers or the enormous amount of resources devoted to cultural projects which aim at reinforcing a sense of nationhood as well as loyalty to the incumbents. Among the external factors accounting for the steadfastness of the Gulf regimes, he points at the huge financial means which rulers have used to build a global soft power based on diplomatic brokerage, strategic investments notably in the West and the development of cultural and academic institutions at home and abroad. Here interesting developments are to be found on the logics behind the financing of academic institutions in the West dedicated to the study of the Gulf or the Middle East (pp. 98–104), a way to control the public knowledge that is being produced on the region.

Among the weaknesses that are undermining the ruling bargain, Davidson first lists the increasing inability of the regimes to maintain the same, very generous, level of allowances and subsidies to their citizens, which challenges their “eudemonic legitimacy” (p. 49). This is due to the progressive depleting of oil reserves but also to the increase of the population, who consume a growing proportion of the rentier resources. Countries like Bahrain and Oman are already affected, with much reduced

oil reserves which, moreover, are more costly to extract than in neighbouring Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. Davidson points at the huge labour problem faced by the Gulf monarchies, where years of lavish distribution have made the phenomenon of voluntary unemployment widespread, especially among young men, who prefer to wait for a good sinecure in the public sector rather than compete in the labour market. However, increasingly important also is involuntary unemployment, which in particular affects the poorer Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman). Fiscal imbalances, overall, render more and more problematic the provision of what Gulf citizens consider as basic services. A telling example is the provision of public housing, a pillar of the Gulf welfare state whereby every citizen, by the sole virtue of his nationality, is entitled to free or highly subsidised housing. Today, the waiting lists to access such housing are very long, meaning that, in the poorer countries, people often have to wait for 10 years or more.

Among the domestic weaknesses listed by the author is also the growing discrimination against significant portions of the national populations. Two cases are given more particular attention - the stateless peoples and the Shias. The presence of stateless peoples, which is a matter of public debate only in Kuwait, results from the unwillingness of states to augment the number of nationals in increasingly difficult fiscal situations or the lack of trust in peoples who claim to be nationals but are deemed to be of controversial national, tribal or ethnic backgrounds (many are of Bedouin descent, many others are suspected of coming from hostile foreign countries like Iraq, Iran or even Saudi Arabia, which is often seen as a cumbersome big brother by small emirates). Discrimination against Shia nationals is even more problematic since it undermines the national integration process. The problem is particularly widespread in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, where opposition movements are well structured among Shia communities, among whom there are regular disturbances and riots.

Among the external factors listed by the author to support his thesis of the coming collapse is the economy-driven transformation of public social practices under the influence of the massive influx of mostly non-Muslim foreigners, labour expatriates but also tourists. The growth of public alcohol consumption, the tolerance of prostitution and the general relaxation of dress-codes and social behaviour is experienced by many citizens as an encroachment on Arab and Islamic values of which Gulf rulers pretend to be the upholders. This feeling is also created by the deepening of security relations with the West, which, among other things, has resulted in an increased Western (American, British, French) military presence in the smaller emirates. As a result, the Arab and Islamic legitimacy of the incumbents is weakened, most notably when they face the critique of organised oppositions claiming to defend Islamic authenticity. The foreign policy is also a factor of strain since some Gulf countries are moving away from the neutral position in regional politics built by their predecessors and tend to espouse more aggressive stances towards some powerful neighbours. Iran is a case in point, which several Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE) have been antagonising. This is putting them on the "front line of any fresh conflict in the Persian Gulf" (p. 171), in particular when these same states endeavour to court Israel, with whom they are actually eager to normalise relations. Finally, Davidson points to the increasing internal factionalism within the ruling dynasties, where coups d'Etat might well become a customary practice.

All in all, *After the Sheikhs*, which has been applauded by critics, makes a useful contribution to the debate about the Gulf monarchies. However, it is first and foremost made for a general audience that has little or no knowledge of these countries. A more informed audience might find the book lacking in many ways. First, although he has accumulated an impressive wealth of information, the author relies a lot on newspapers (in English) without systematically cross-checking information with other sources. This is particularly striking when he discusses such an important issue as labour market dynamics, for which he relies uncritically on figures released in the press or by international institutions rather than going directly to the statistics released by the local institutions, which are now very often available on the Internet and sometimes contradict those he gives. He also ignores the academic literature which discusses these figures.

Another flaw is the author's over-reliance on his deep knowledge of the United Arab Emirates, where he has lived and worked and on which he has authored two reference books. A significant number of the examples are taken from this country and phenomena that are proper to it are uncritically applied to the others. Hence the description of wealth distribution through charities sponsored by members of the ruling families, while it perfectly applies to countries like the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, only marginally applies to other countries where distribution is much more institutionalised and less personalised. Overall, the degree of institutionalisation differs sharply from one country to another, and so is the way the social contract is being crafted. The over-reliance on the Emirati model is moreover distorting the analysis of state-society relations. Hence, the assertion that opposition movements in the Gulf monarchies "have not been broad-based and represented only narrow sections of the indigenous populations" cannot be applied to Bahrain, Kuwait and even Saudi Arabia, where there are deep-seated and sometimes well-structured opposition movements.

Overall, while the provocative thesis that the Gulf monarchies will soon collapse has enriched the debates, it can seem a bit unsophisticated to political scientists, especially when the author takes the precaution of underlining that they will collapse or "at least most of them in their present form" (p. 2). This puts the debate in the fairly different analytical framework of change rather than that of the rapid, revolutionary breakdown that the title is suggesting. Indeed, the structural weaknesses he analyses only show that the ruling bargain such as it was progressively crafted following the development of the oil economy is no more sustainable, not that it cannot be adapted. Actually, the Gulf monarchies are engaged in reforms which aim at adjusting the ruling bargain, in particular the economic aspects of it. While not as fast and far reaching as one could expect, these reforms are actually modifying state-society relations. In the poorer countries where the small fiscal room of manoeuvre renders them more urgent, different forms of taxation are now being implemented, including on citizens (for example to finance workforce nationalisation in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman). Subsidies are being reduced on basic goods and services. In Bahrain and Oman, a great number of nationals are now working in the purely private sector, including in such socially demeaning jobs, by local standards, as supermarket cashiers or salesmen – and saleswomen – in shopping malls. In other words, the traditional political economy is shifting. While this creates tensions, these have been managed so far.

Moreover, three years now after the ‘Arab Spring’, the events have shown that repression is a very efficient means to deal with discontent, and that regimes can be reshuffled while none of what analysts see as unmanageable economic and political contradictions are being addressed. Actually, the history is full of examples of lasting regimes which display fiscal imbalances, antagonise their neighbours and discriminate against their population.