

# Democracy in the middle east



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Prior to the 2011 uprisings, which engulfed the Middle East, Libya and Saudi Arabia are evidently similar states on a number of grounds. Both Saudi Arabia and Libya are Middle Eastern countries and most of the population belong to the Sunni Muslim faith. However, unlike Libya, Saudi Arabia is a monarchy. In Saudi, the ruling family “ has broad powers with limitations coming from a need to observe Shari’a and other Saudi traditions” (background note: Saudi Arabia. The two countries reflect distinct similarities, particularly concerning their abundant resource wealth, media censorship, weak political institutions and coercive force.

The most notable similarity between the two Arab regimes is its overwhelming classification as Rentier state as both derive more than half of its economic revenues directly from oil . Discovered in the 1950’s, Libya earns most of its money from its exports compared to its imports. Libya had the “ highest per capita GDP in Africa” in the 90s (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia 6th edition 11/1/2011, Ebsco; Entelis, 38). Internationally, Saudi Arabia has the world’s largest production and exportation of oil.

Saudi “ oil accounts for more than 90% of the country’s exports and nearly 75% of government revenues. Its “ proven reserves are estimated to be 263 billion barrels, about one-quarter of world oil reserves” (Background Note: Saudi Arabia) Another distinct similarity between the two authoritarian regimes is their extensive measures to control and censor media access. In the case of Libya, Ghadaffi pursued a policy of “ Arab nationalism and strict adherence to Islamic law”, ultimately marking the beginning of state censorship with the objective of limiting foreign, particularly Western, influences on Libyan society(Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). For

example, in accordance to article 13 of the 1969 Constitution, freedom of expression was conditional civil liberty, “ within the limits of public interest and the principles of the Revolution” (reporters without Borders). Although the criminal code has been amended, censorship in Libya remains extremely high (Reporters without Borders).

Established in 1902, the regime has struggles to balance its “ traditional, tribal and decentralized society under its cultural, ideological, and religious hegemony” and subsequently h transformed into a regional leader of media censorship (Wilson, 2002). It was not until 1999 that the Saudi government permitted the use of Internet in the Kingdom (Wilson, 2002). The government’s devotion to blocking Internet sites has reached new heights as it actively enlists its general population to report sites that are deemed “ immoral” or offensive to the regime, such as porn. Interestingly, despite such extensive censorship, Saudi Arabia has the second highest amount of bloggers in the Middle East, with women being a large part of that group. However, women have to disguise themselves for fear of being caught by the “ authorities” (Ian Black, 2009, the guardian). Furthermore, both Libya and Saudi have a long history of weak, formal institutions.

In both cases, any form of “ independent political or civic associations” are banned, such as political parties and elections. Formations of such groups are met with severe consequences, such as death (Background Note: Saudi Arabia). Also, “ public accountability is virtually nonexistent, and civil liberties forever in jeopardy (Background Note: Saudi Arabia). If activists within civil society initiate any kind of independent political action” they can suffer from long-term imprisonment or torture (Entelis 39).

Similar to the Saudi regime, Gaddafi was an authoritarian leader who centralized all state power around himself (Columbia electronic encyclopedia). According to Entelis “ for the last four decades, charismatic authority has never been permitted to evolve into a rational legal system of rule, nor has it fully eradicated the traditional bases of legitimacy in which tribal identity, family ties and Islam have remained powerful constants in the lives of ordinary Libyans” (Entelis 38). In 1977, under Gaddafi’s newly established “ Jamahiriya”, also known as “ the Peoples State”, Libya transformed into a “ depoliticized entity run by the few for the benefit of the few, all rationalized under the ideological mantra of people power” (Luis Martinez, 151; Entelis, 39 ). After having examined the numerous similarities between the two autocratic regimes, one may wonder why these states experienced such diverse outcomes in the wake of the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring has challenged previous assumptions and theories regarding democracy in the region. It demonstrated that although oil wealth is a major advantage for a regimes survival, if not allocated correctly, it can have a reverse affect. Moreover, scholars have failed to acknowledge the impact that sectarian divides within Arab states with regard to the regimes survival. Accordingly, the following section will provide an insight into why these two resource wealth states, Libya and Saudi, have experienced two diverging outcomes. Body: The revolutions that shocked the Arab world were largely unexpected through the eyes of most academics.

Waves of protests rocked the region, starting in Tunisia, and spiralled throughout North Africa. During the events in 2011, Libya’s own revolution was quietly brewing, most notably in the city of Benghazi. Although Libya

was a society deeply in turmoil long before the uprisings began on the 15th of February 2011, the renowned rentier state seemed unlikely to succumb to protests. Over the years, “ Gaddafi has proven to be a controversial, complex, and contradictory political survivor during his long reign in Libya, in spite of numerous internal and external challenges to his rule” (Blanchard 2011, 24). For nearly four decade, Gaddafi has single handily exercised authoritarian rule over Libya through “ carefully balancing and manipulating complex patronage networks, traditional tribal structures, and byzantine layers of national, regional, and local governance” (Blanchard 2011, 24).

Previous theories of democracy would have expected Libya to overcome such uprisings due to its access to great wealth and strong coercive apparatus. However, there were a number of factors overlooked by such theories, including the impact of unequal revenue distribution, fractionalization of society and international intervention. Control over natural resources has often served as a key factor scholars have attributed to the sustainability of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. Prior to the events in 2011, scholars have stressed that oil wealth has led to the building of patronage networks, providing social services, and directing the development of dependent private sector. As put forward by Gregory Gause, rentier states generally used their wealth to ultimately please the population, mostly in times of crisis.

(Gause, 2011, 85). For decades, Libya has been characterized as a “ quintessential rentier state, one in which rulers have had the luxury of ruling without the consent -or the tax revenues- of those being ruled” (Entelis, 38). However, the events of the Arab Spring revealed that oil producing states

are in fact not immune to popular uprisings, “ rather than wasted on pet projects and harebrained schemes”, rentier states must redistribute revenues properly in order to survive (Gause, 2011, 85). This illustrates the case of Libya, as it was the only oil producing state to be engulfed with public demonstrations. Unlike the Saudi regime, Gaddafi created “ years of artificially induced scarcity in everything from simple consumer goods to basic medical care generated widespread corruption” (Anderson, 2011, 497). Although the rentier state theory is still relevant to resilience of democracy in the Middle East during the Arab Spring, it failed to take into account the consequences of long-term unequal distribution of resources within society.

Gaddafi has undoubtedly adopted a system of regime security through scarcity and unwillingness to distribute oil wealth efficiently that ultimately backfired on the survival of the regime. Composed of numerous tribes within three main regions, Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica, Libyan society has faced decades of internal fractionalization (Blanchard 2011, 24). Libya was characterized by decades of nepotism and patrimonial leadership, ultimately widening the gap between Gaddafi and those he ruled. Like many of his fellow Arab rulers, Gaddafi ruled the country through nepotism, and openly favoured his own tribe: the Gaddafi, who dominated government positions. Gaddafi also lent extensive support for three other larger tribes: the Magariha, Misurata and Warfalla.

These tribes enjoyed the privileges of the Gaddafi regime, including top government positions, even though many of its tribal members largely opposed the regime (Blanchard 2011, 22). Such sectarian divides caused widespread distrust not only towards the government, but also towards each

other. As highlighted by Lisa Anderson, “ due to the absence of any public-sector bureaucracy, including a reliable police force, kin networks have provided safety and security as well as access to goods and services”. Subsequently, Gaddafi experienced great difficulties in ruling over the people, as many people were unhappy with a “ dysfunctional police state”(Roumani Jaques 681-682). The Regimes inability to contain such sectarian divisions began to unravel at the beginning of the protests, as it was along such kin networks that Libyan society ruptured causing the regime to dissolve (Anderson, 2011, 497). Initially, Gaddafi tried to wage war against opposition tribes, in hopes of outlining the conflict as “ an inter-tribe conflict” (Ayhan, 2011).

However, after years of being “ externalized from the government”, February 24th 2011 marked a defining moment for Gaddafi when opponent tribes agreed to create “ a new administrative and political structure” (Ayhan, 2011). It was the very tribes who experienced oppression, intimidation and execution, which united against Gaddafi, leading Libya into civil war. As merely an instrumental tool of Gaddafi’ regime, Gaddafi’s coercive apparatus also disbanded in the face of popular protests as tribal fragmentation also existed within the army—a weak institution—and within the paramilitary and security organizations. (Dalacoura, 70; Gause, 85).

During Gaddafi’s rule, there has been eight recorded assassination attempts on his life, the most notable occurred in 1993 when an estimated 2000 of his own military soldiers from the Warfalla tribe dissented against him due to underrepresentation in top military positions within the army (NewsOne, 2011). During the Arab Spring, only “ units led by the rulers’ families have

supported the regimes, while other units have defected to the opposition, stayed on the sidelines, or just gone home. ” (Gause, 2011, 85). This clearly indicates that if a sectarian divide exists within the state's institutions, such as its coercive apparatus; the regime will crumble in the face of popular protests.

Therefore, the social composition of society and the presence of factional division within governmental institutions play a crucial role in the outcome, as illustrated by the case of Libya. As emphasized by Eva Bellin's theory on states coercive apparatus, states cannot maintain its control over its military institution if it cannot retain international support and recognition of the regime. Such an outcome was demonstrated in Libya as former Libyan allies, most notably three members of the UN Security Council: Britain, France and the United States. Both Italy, France and Britain had significant oil interests in Libya that they could not risk jeopardizing. For example, as Libya's closest European ally, Italy relies on Libya for approximately 22% of its oil.

Similarly, France relies on Libya for 16% of its oil (Vanderbruck, 2011).. The retraction of such fundamental support coupled with the decision by NATO to conduct a military intervention were defining factors leading to the fall of Gaddafi's regime. Moreover, Gaddafi's excessive reaction to the rebellion proved to be counter-productive as his response fuelled the protests which caught the attention of the international community.

(Dalacoura, 2011, 69). It is important to note that the Libyan uprising could not have occurred without the help of international actors. The main reason for such measures by the international community " Libya's dictator retained at least



the acquiescence of significant social and political elements, and his overthrow might not have been possible without foreign intervention. (Dalacoura, 2011, 71).

Eva Bellins coercive apparatus can be highlighted here, as there are three factors to be looked at, fiscal health, international support networks and the level of institutionalism. These three factors undoubtedly contributed to the demise of Ghadafi's regimes. Saudi Arabia, in light of the 2011 Arab Spring, was able to effectively avoid the demand for regime change, which successfully toppled neighbouring autocratic states of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Despite being an absolute monarchy, a number of factors made Saudi Arabia significantly less vulnerable to the demands of reform, including the royal family itself.

As the regime security suggests, the primary concern for authoritarian Arab regime is its own survival. Since it's founding in 1932, the Al Saud dynasty has maintained its resilience towards democratization through a number of distinct ways. Firstly, due to the nature in which Saudi Arabia was formed, under the ruling of the Al Saud coupled with the embedded religious leadership of Al-Wahhab, the Al Saud's have based their legitimacy through religion (Keyman, 2012). Their legitimacy is further enforced by the extensive religious nature of the state, from its active political role given to the ulama to Sharia Law.

This adds to the resilience of the regime because it creates obstacles for reform, as opposition to the regime would be considered as an opposition to Islam (Keyman, 2012). Thus, the Saudi monarchy's strength lies in its close

affinity with projects of nation building, especially during its early stages (Anderson, 1991). According to Philip Khoury, the Al Saud royal family “ has become a cluster of tribal segments; it is heavily intermarried and bound by its elite interests”, also serving as “ an informal mechanism for representation” in which members were able to maintain contact with various groups in society, in turn, “ keeping the families close to those they rule” (Keyman, 2012). A second fundamental factor in the regimes stability is the fact that the Al Saud family control one quarter of the world’s oil reserves, subsequently making them a global leader in oil production and one of the world’s most powerful families (US Department of State).

According to statistics, Saudi Arabia’s oil revenues account for 90-95% of all its export earnings, which constitute 40% of its gross domestic product (Institute for the Analysis of Global Security). In 2011 alone, the IMF projected Saudi Arabia’s oil revenues to reach a record \$324 billion, approximately a \$171 billion increase from its 2010 income (El-Shenawi, 2011). Subsequently, Saudi Arabia overwhelmingly classifies as a rentier state: a state that has centralized its economy around its resources and use its revenues to further securitize its security institutions and patronage networks (Ross, 329; Lynch, 130). As a result, the regime is able to devote its wealth towards ensuring its survival in two distinct ways: increasing social welfare budgets and further militarizing the state. Prior to the Arab Spring, Saudi nationals free health care, interest free home and business loans and college education is heavily subsidized for those who seek education overseas, making Saudi Arabia the most advanced welfare state (Wilson Quarterly, 2004). In reaction to events that took place during the Arab

Spring, the Saudi Kingdom clearly demonstrated that oil revenues remain a reliable tool in maintaining regime security.

For example, during the months of February and March, King Abdulla of Saudi Arabia quickly announced a new spending package of more than \$100 billion, which included a minimum wage and cost of living bonus for government employees, and an increase in health spending (Gause, 85; Ibrahim, 2011). Furthermore, in September 2011, King Abdullah granted, for the first time in history, women the right to vote and run in future municipal elections (BBC, 2011). Subsequently, such “ political liberalization” and economic enticements have proved to be an effective strategy for appeasement of citizens and regime survival (Keyman, 2012) In Saudi Arabia, the events of the Arab Spring have illustrated the ways in which oil revenues can also be diverted towards sustaining a strong coercive apparatus, with the intent to keep citizens politically disbanded. According to statistics, Saudi Arabia allocated \$45 billion dollars towards its military in 2011, falling close behind France’s military expenditure (Cordesman, 2011). Moreover, the regime employs a higher percentage of its population than France in its branches of security, with 9. 86%.

Furthermore, like many other regimes in the region, Saudi’s coercive establishments are entangled and governed through patrimonial logic, where entire divisions of these forces are “ family affairs” (Bellin 148, 149). Thus, “ regime change would jeopardize the predominance of favoured tribal elites in the Saudi military” (Bellin, 149). Additionally, the Arab Spring was defined by the ways in which security forces across the Arab world responded to the peaceful protests, which reflected two key factors: the extent of social

divisions within society and institutionalism of the military (Gause, 2011: 84). Within Saudi society, there exists an ideological divide between the majority Sunni and its minority Shiite population; however, it is marginal considering that the Shiites only constitutes 15% of the population (meyer,).

For decades the minority group, isolated to Saudi Arabia's oil rich eastern provinces, have been excluded from " upper levels of civil bureaucracy," thus preventing them from gaining any sort of political influences or voice. Moreover, such ideological divisions have been absent within the regimes military apparatus as the Shiite community are intentionally excluded from security force recruitment, particularly to the National Guard (Library of Congress, 1992). Saudi Arabia's National Guard (SANG) is a secondary military establishment, committed to protecting the Al Saud royal family from internal upheaval (GlobalSecurity. org).

The National Guard constitutes a " tribal force foraged out of those tribal elements loyal to the Saud family", solely recruited from its central and western regions where it retains much support, ultimately fortifying the regime (Gause, 84; Pike, 2012). Therefore, unlike Libya, Saudi Arabia's military remains loyal to the ruling family. In turn, this makes it increasingly difficult for any opposition movements to survive in such a hostile environment. In the past, Saudi Arabia has never hesitated to use force to suppress public rebellion, but more often than not, its abundant wealth has enable the regime to buy off its opponents (Szayna: 265).

However, its willingness to use force became evident once Saudi authorities, already shaken by events in the region, became aware of a possible

demonstration and quickly mobilized in major cities and the eastern provinces (Black, 2011). Justified on security grounds, the protests on the “Day of Rage” resulted in the regime repressing peaceful demonstrators and reformists. Moreover, the Saudi regime took advantage of the sectarian division within its society and announced the criminalization of “dissent as a terrorist crime” (Amnesty International, 2011). In April 2011, Saudi Arabia’s Interior Ministry announced that 5000 people had been detained in connection with the “external threat” (Amnesty International, 2011). With already weak support for the Shiite community, the regime successfully managed to prevent the mobilization of protests by widening the sectarian division within its society through propaganda that claimed that the external threat to the regime was a part of an Iranian Shia conspiracy against the ruling monarchy (Al Rasheed, 2011; Szayna, 266).

The exaggeration of a Shiite ideological expansion proved to be effective in restraining protestors due to the deep seeded animosity between the Sunni and Shiite Islamic sects. The final factor contributing to the regimes success in Saudi Arabia is its maintenance of crucial allies, namely the United States. As identified by Eva Bellin, the strength of a state lies heavily in its ability to sustain international support. The Arabian Kingdom is far from an ordinary rentier state as its strategic location and its political role in the Arab world, has made the monarchy an important ally that the United States intends to maintain. Unlike Libya, the disruption of the flow of Saudi oil to the global markets could have devastating effects for world economies. Thus, as asserted by Katrina Dalacoura, the Saudi’s ability to resist popular pressure was largely due to its ability to maintain international support.