



C A R N E G I E E N D O W M E N T
for International Peace

Event Summary

“Political Reform in the GCC States: Current Situation and Future Prospects” September 23-24, 2004

GRC-Carnegie workshop calls for sustaining political reform through promoting an appropriate domestic and regional environment

A two-day workshop – “Political Reform in the GCC States: Current Situation and Future Prospects” ended on September 24 with a constructive call to sustain the process of political reform in the GCC States as the plank on which political legitimacy could be consolidated and the relation between state and society could be reconstructed on the basis of a new social contract. Participants at the workshop emphasized the need to uphold reform in a bid to contain external interventions in the domestic affairs of the GCC countries under the much-touted pretext of championing reform. Political reform calls for creating the right regional environment and making the best of international conditions, the participants said.

The workshop, jointly organized by the Dubai-based Gulf Research Center (GRC) and the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, was attended by a pool of eminent regional and international academics and experts and involved six sessions.

While suggesting that external factors had helped, to some extent, in bringing about “cosmetic changes” in the region, a number of participants emphasized during the session entitled “Why is Political Reform in the GCC States Taking Place Now?”, that political reform is first and foremost an internal affair while external factors retain at best a general role of support and incentive for reform. Participants pointed to some internal factors, such as the emergence of an expanded middle class, the reiterated calls by some political and social forces for reform, and emergent economic difficulties facing the GCC States in varying degrees in the wake of declining oil prices.

Participants at the workshop pointed out that reform has been the platform through which some GCC States, notably Qatar and Bahrain, have been empowered to build a new form of political legitimacy. As such, participants suggested, there really exists a form of domestic harmony at the level of each state about the national reform agenda implemented in accordance with the specific conditions of each individual country.

Speakers at the workshop remarked that the US reform and democratization drive in the Arab world lacks credibility. This is attributable, as some speakers stressed, to the approach embraced by Washington in dealing with the ruling regimes across the region and throughout the world. The US has often sacrificed the principles of democracy on the altar of its own

national interests. Another reason has to do with US policies towards Arab and Muslim issues, notably the Arab-Israeli conflict of which the Palestinian question remains the core.

Participants made the point that only a fundamental change in the US policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict paving the path for a settlement in compliance with international law and legitimacy constitutes an essential element for regaining some of the lost credibility of Washington's calls for democratization in the region. After the initial pretexts for the war fell apart and neither any weapons of mass destruction were ever found nor any relation between Saddam Hussein's regime and Al-Qaeda was ever established, the US dubbed the war against Iraq as a war for the edification of a democratic regime that would be the locomotive pulling political reform in the region. It now seems that the future US role in Iraq remains the true litmus test for the credibility of Washington's democratization agenda in the region.

On the issue of "Differing Views on Political Reform in the GCC States", some of the speakers at the workshop said that "more participatory politics could end up being more regressive than otherwise", at least in the short term. While some suggested that there can hardly be "representation without taxation", others reacted to the gains made by some Islamist parties and movements in the recent elections held in some countries in the region as being an indication of their wide popularity. This, some participants pointed out, poses a critical issue bearing closely on the relation between moderate Islamist movements and the process of democratization and the need to integrate these formations within the various unfolding political processes.

Discussing the role of religion, some of the experts said that "political Islam has stolen the show from political nationalism, a reality hard to ignore". Moreover, democracy, which is a "rule of inclusion cannot exclude any party or movement, no matter what its political program, on the obvious condition that it abides by the rules of the political game, denounces resort to violence and commits itself to espousing peaceful means while engaging in politics." In fact, "democracy does represent the ideal political formula which may help Islamists and the other political forces and movements achieve equilibrium", some analyzed.

Citing the "obstacles" hampering political reform, the workshop pointed to "legislatures not exactly suitable for political reform, a deficit in political and civic culture, which usually represents the essential lever for democratic reform, the lack of assertiveness in many cases of civil society organizations, the limited power of legislative bodies to legislate and oversee the performance of the executive branch, in addition to some existing social values that hinder women's political participation and the presence of a large expatriate labor."

The negative impact of Iraq and US factors were the focus of the session on "Regional and International Contexts of Reform in the GCC States". Rather than intensify the drive for reforms, the US "intentions and actions" and the instability in Iraq in which the US plays a visible role had retarded the drive for reforms, speakers said. In this connection, participants at the workshop observed that it is hard to build a democratic and stable regime in Iraq, at least in the short and medium terms, even on the assumption that security and stability are fully restored to this war-battered country. The reason, as some speakers suggested, lies in the weakness, if not the utter absence, of the pillars on which real democratization could be founded in Iraq. As such, a number of participants concluded, it would take some time to lay the groundwork for true democratic governance.

The last session touched on the “Future Prospects of Political Reform” and highlighted the need for a combination of factors likely to contribute to the implementation of reform in the GCC States. First, some speakers emphasized that if the external role is limited to being a “backstage player” and to persuasion, then the internal political dynamics could gain enough momentum over time to boost the reform process. Since the US had lost much of its credibility in the eyes of the people of the region, Europe could be a better external partner. There is a need today for the GCC States to foster deeper communication and cooperation with the EU on the specific reform issue. The EU approach to democratic reform in the Arab world, speakers remarked, is clearly different from Washington’s.

In the final analysis, participants at the workshop underlined the need for political reform to spring from and breed on domestic soil, though it is always possible to uphold the reform process with positive external props. In this sense, the role of civil society organizations and the private sector in the reform process ought to be enhanced. A genuinely democratic culture needs to be built as it represents one of the key pillars on which political reform and democratization could unravel. Educational reform, too, needs to be sustained in keeping with domestic realities and national objectives. And economic reform should be invigorated as it is the only viable remedy to the challenge of unemployment facing many GCC States.

Without a concerted move towards enacting these measures, experts at the workshop maintained, it is highly probable that socio-economic-political problems would transform into a suffocating crisis. As conditions stand today, there is a pressing need to effectively gear up the pace of reform in a bid to avert the undesirable ramifications that could arise out of the prevailing problems. What, in fact, consolidates the reform project is the principled recognition by its advocates of the legitimacy of the standing ruling regimes.

“Deploying confident and positive steps down the reform path will no doubt foster the regimes’ legitimacy and help cement political and social stability”, concluded the experts at the workshop.

Prepared by the Gulf Research Centre.