

Civil society and democratization in the Arab Gulf

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Qatar has been a notable exception to the wave of popular political mobilization that has struck Arab countries since January 2011. This is particularly so given the prominent role of its state-owned television station Al Jazeera in supporting many — though not all — of the uprisings. Why has Qatar been seemingly immune to the protest wave? Its wealth matters, of course, but other wealthy countries like Libya and Bahrain have experienced turmoil. Some new insights into this question can be found in the Qatar World Values Survey (QWVS), an important survey of Qatari public opinion administered in December 2010 on the eve of the Arab revolts.

For decades, democracy promotion efforts have tended to focus on strengthening civil society and stimulating civic engagement as methods of encouraging the emergence of a democratic political culture. This is nowhere more present than in the Arab world. Between 1991 and 2001, some \$150 million — more than half of all U.S. funding for democracy-promotion in the Middle East — went toward this goal. Yet the QWVS revealed that, in fact, civic participation in Qatar is actually associated not only with reduced support for democracy itself, but also with a disproportionate lack of the values and behaviors thought to be essential to it, including confidence in government institutions and social tolerance. In Qatar, the QWVS showed that civic participation cannot lead individuals toward a greater appreciation for democracy, for it is precisely those who least value democracy that tend to be most actively engaged.

Qatar, like most Arab Gulf countries, has generally been as unreceptive to public opinion research as to electoral democracy. Indeed, the Qatar World Values Survey represents the first national survey of any kind to investigate attitudes toward governance and political life in Qatar. It was carried out by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) of Qatar University, which was established in 2008 to provide scholarly and policy-relevant information about the social and economic attitudes of Qatari citizens and expatriates living in the country. Since its establishment, SESRI has developed a comprehensive sampling frame from which it draws representative probability-based samples, along with a corps of trained fieldworkers who collect data through face-to-face interviews. The QWVS was funded by a grant, earned in peer-reviewed competition, from the Qatar National Research Foundation.

The QWVS asked respondents about various norms and behaviors said to be important in begetting or sustaining democratic political institutions, including social tolerance, political interest, appreciation for democracy, confidence in government institutions and participation in civil society organizations. Contrary to the assumptions of present Mideast democratization efforts, however, it found that civil society participation does not lead individuals toward a greater appreciation for democracy, nor toward a democratic political culture. Instead, male and female Qataris who channel their social, economic, and political ambitions through participation in civic associations are disproportionately likely to be less tolerant of others, less oriented toward democracy and less confident in formal governmental institutions. These findings are the result of a careful multivariate analysis, which offers a strong foundation for inferring, albeit not proving, causality. Thus, overall, it seems clear that associational life in Qatar does not seem to be an incubator of democracy.

The QWVS found that participation in civic associations is about 32 percent lower among Qatari males of above-average compared to below-average appreciation for democracy; 26 percent lower among those of above-average institutional confidence; and 22 percent lower among those who exhibit high social tolerance. Among Qatari females, these negative effects are similar if more moderate at 22 percent, 14 percent and 20 percent respectively. Yet this disproportionate lack of support for democracy and confidence in state institutions among engaged Qataris does not result simply from lack of interest in politics. On the contrary, civic

participation is 64 percent higher among males who express above-average political interest and 22 percent higher among politically-interested females.

These relationships may be explained by the institutional character of Qatar and the other Arab Gulf regimes. In places where democracy does not exist to begin with, private associations can just as easily operate in support of the prevailing regime as in support of the behaviors and attitudes thought to beget democratic citizens. Indeed, the survivability of such organizations is linked precisely to the extent they do so. In the rent-based Arab Gulf, where the state's principal role is the top-down distribution of revenue generated from the sale of natural resources, private civic associations are a natural locus of the clientelist networks that link all citizens directly or indirectly to the state. Furthermore, with every eight out of 10 residents of Qatar being foreign expatriates or migrant laborers, Qatar's citizen population of no more than 300,000 tends to be inward-looking and to seek opportunities to be connected to one another and to the regime.

As a result, civic organizations in Qatar represent traditional, non-democratic forms of societal involvement — opportunities to build broader connections, to have a life outside the home, but not opportunities to learn about and experience democratic politics or to mobilize support for particular policies. These associations are attractive to individuals who have political interest but choose not to channel it into genuine political activity because they either do not support or do not understand what actual democracy involves and, in any case, lack the confidence in the prevailing political system to believe that real political change is even an option. These associations supply social involvement and connections for persons who have broader interests but whose values and judgments do not lead them to think about politics in terms of democracy.

Thus associational life in Qatar does not seem to be a route to a democratic culture. It is simply an alternative means to securing a larger personal share of the benefits around which the entire state is structured, and to which each individual is equally entitled *qua* citizen. Rather than undermining traditional society and the existing regime, these associations are simply an extension of them, with the most involved being those who benefit from it the most — and who thus would stand to lose most from any revision of the political status quo. From here it is no great mystery why they tend not to have a strong appreciation — in the sense of both normative support for and cognitive understanding of — democracy. Thinking poorly of official political institutions, as well as having no prior experience with democratic

alternatives, these individuals are attracted to and involve themselves in associations that are quite traditional and parochial.

These conclusions do not mean that Qataris hold negative attitudes toward the democratic uprisings taking place elsewhere in the Arab world, or that they would oppose the introduction of democratic institutions in their own country. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that this is not the case. Recognizing that Qataris are by and large satisfied with the personal freedoms and economic opportunities that they currently enjoy, however, this is a subject for future research. What the present investigation does show is that civic participation on its own will not lead Qataris toward more democratic orientations such as political trust, social tolerance or support for a democratic political system. It is precisely those who least value and least understand democracy — and who most benefit from the political status quo — that tend to be most actively involved in civil society.

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