Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
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Workshop 6

Electoral Frameworks, Party Systems, and Electoral Outcomes: Comparing Elections in the Gulf

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Abstract

This workshop examines the transformation of Gulf representative politics through the study of elections. The onslaught of political challenges in the Gulf – post-2011 popular mobilizations; regional security crises; and oil-induced fiscal pressures – have had a substantial, yet disparate, impact on electoral frameworks, party systems, and electoral outcomes. This workshop seeks to analyze these changes through historical analysis of single countries as well as comparative studies drawn from across the GCC states, Iran and Iraq. While the focus is on elections, we welcome broader reflections, beyond electoral laws and process (funding, campaigning, monitoring), to political behavior (ideology, cleavages, participation) and political meaning (policies, identities): not only how, but also why and to what end.

Description and Rationale

The 'Arab Spring' that started in Tunisia in December 2010 generated a wave of popular mobilization that materialized in very few, but significant, electoral and institutional reforms. New constitutions were adopted in Morocco and Tunisia, with the latter experiencing a complete change in the ruling regime. In the Gulf region (the six GCC states, Iran, Iraq and Yemen), the emphasis was on reform, with some steps taken to expand electorates, such as the Saudi Arabia's decision to grant the vote to women in 2013, and the UAE decision to substantially increase its electoral college for the 2015 elections. Other states made some efforts to show transparency and competitiveness of electoral processes, such as Iran, Iraq, and Oman.

However, the amplified demands of the opposition were also met with new restrictions on participation, such as the dissolution of the main Bahrain opposition society, al-Wefaq, and the exclusion of religious officials and those arrested on blasphemy and lese majeste convictions in Bahrain and Kuwait, respectively.

The lack of substantial improvements in electoral frameworks, or in some cases, changes perceived as detrimental to the opposition, seem to have discouraged turnout in elections, with boycotts undertaken in Kuwait and Bahrain. Meanwhile, the lack of political agreement in Iraq, despite the reportedly clean elections of 2014, generated a political crisis that is still ongoing. On the other hand, the repression of political demonstrations after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections was not replicated in 2013, with population interest in engaging in elections recovering, at least at the presidential level.

After the Arab Spring all the countries included in the Gulf region held elections, as follows:

Country	Type of election	Date
Qatar	Municipal elections	May 2011
UAE	Legislative elections	September 2011
Saudi Arabia	Municipal elections	September 2011
Bahrain	Legislative by-elections	September 2011
Oman	Legislative elections	October 2011
Kuwait	Legislative elections	February 2012
Yemen	Presidential elections	February 2012
Iran	Legislative elections	March 2012
Kuwait	Legislative elections	December 2012

Iran	Presidential elections	June 2013
Kuwait	Legislative elections	July 2013
Iraq	Legislative and Kurdish regional elections	April 2014
Kuwait	Legislative by-elections	July 2014
Bahrain	Legislative elections	November 2014
Qatar	Municipal elections	May 2015
UAE	Legislative elections	October 2915
Oman	Legislative elections	October 2015
Saudi Arabia	Municipal elections	December 2015
Iran	Legislative and Assembly of Experts elections	February 2016
Kuwait	Legislative elections	November 2016
Iran	Presidential elections	May 2017

Many of these elections were undertaken with significant changes in timing, electoral districting, and voting procedures, but with different aims and outcomes, making the comparative analysis of these changes worthy of study. This workshop will thus welcome an examination of the impact of the Arab Spring on elections in all of their aspects: electoral frameworks and laws, party systems, election turnout, and election results. More generally, we welcome papers that comparatively analyze the role of parties, political groups and associations, as well as electoral campaigns and election monitoring.

At the same time, this workshop welcomes a deeper questioning of elections beyond process to political meaning: Do electoral changes represent a response to the demands of local populations, or do they serve the interests of political and economic elite? What is the value of elections for institutions without effective policy making and legislative powers? Why do candidates run for elective positions and why do people vote? Are elections conducted in the Gulf region meaningful?

Anticipated Participants

The workshop is seeking theoretically strong and empirically grounded papers. Comparative papers as well as single case study analysis are welcome, with the regional cases providing plenty of opportunities for analyzing the same type of elections across different countries.

Papers on the following specific topics will be welcomed:
- Electoral turnout/political behavior
- Election management and funding
- Electoral monitoring and observation
- Transparency/integrity of elections
- Role of political parties/association/groups
- Tribal/religious/ideological cleavages
- Comparative analysis of legislative/municipal elections in two or more cases
- Historical comparative analysis of elections in the same country
- Performance of elected candidates/ electoral campaigning

Workshop Director Profiles

Luciano Zaccara is Research Assistant Professor in Gulf Politics at the Qatar University Gulf Studies Center. He is also a Visiting Research Fellow at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, a Honorary Research Fellow at the Exeter University Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies in United Kingdom, and Director of the Observatory on Politics and Elections in the Arab and Muslim World in Spain. He obtained a BA in Political Science from National University of Rosario, Argentina, and a PhD in Arab and Islamic Studies from Autonoma University of Madrid, Spain.

His research focuses on the political and electoral systems in Iran and the GCC countries as well as international politics in the Gulf. He has published an edited volume on Electoral Processes in Middle East and North Africa (in Spanish), and numerous articles, chapters and a monograph on Iranian and Gulf politics. He is founder and director of the Spanish OPEMAM project (Observatory on Politics and Elections in Arab and Muslim Countries) composed of more than fifteen researchers.

Kristin Smith Diwan is a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, D.C. She works in both comparative politics and international relations and specializes in Arab and Islamist politics. Her current projects concern political activism, generational change, and the evolution of Islamism in the GCC states. Her analyses of Gulf affairs have appeared in many publications, among them *Geopolitics, Middle East Report, Financial Times, Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy*.

Diwan was previously an assistant professor at the American University School of International Service where she still teaches in an adjunct capacity. She has held visiting scholar positions at both the George Washington University Institute for Middle East Studies and the Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. From

2013-14, she served as a visiting senior fellow at the Atlantic Council Hariri Center for the Middle East where she published on youth movements and participated in the Strategic Dialogue for a New US-Gulf Partnership. She received her PhD in political science from Harvard University and holds an MA in international affairs from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

Selected Readings

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