

## **Are Middle Eastern Monarchies Poised for Democratization?**

Jason Brownlee  
Department of Government  
University of Texas at Austin  
brownlee@austin.utexas.edu

**Abstract:** Scholars of authoritarianism in the Middle East have speculated that the region's monarchies may offer the best hope for a substantive, gradual transition to electoral democracy. Whether seemingly anachronistic kingdoms and emirates could form the vanguard of a regional democratic wave remains an open question, but the very institution of monarchism has been considered an advantage for political reform. Whereas presidential autocrats are imperiled when the opposition makes electoral gains, monarchs may allow alternative political currents to compete, win power, and govern right beside them. The combination of monarchism and parliamentarism offers a path to power-sharing and democratization that is less available in other political systems. This paper compares the propensity of Middle Eastern monarchies and non-monarchies for regime change and democratization. Although it is impossible to discern the future course of regimes in the region, I look at their track record and evaluate the likelihood of a monarchic path to democratization.

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The potential for power sharing between palace and parliament has turned monarchies such as Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait into come-from-behind frontrunners in the quest for Middle East democratization. As presidential autocrats (in Syria, Egypt, and Yemen) groomed their sons to succeed them — thus confirming a legacy of further authoritarianism — comparativists turned attention to their seemingly anachronistic peers. Legislatures in the region's monarchies appeared to provide a political incubator in which opposition parties could compete for influence in government and even participate in governing. Michael Herb noted constitutional monarchy was an ideal setting for the kinds of "mutual guarantees" that historically preceded democratization (Dahl 1974; Herb 1999). Along similar lines, Larry Diamond has speculated that monarchs could steadily cede influence over domestic policies while retaining power over security and defense. As opposition movements took center-stage, the monarchy would recede to the wings but retain the right to intervene, much like military elites in Turkey and Thailand (Diamond 2008: 286).

It remains to be seen whether this monarchical route to democratization would circumvent the obstacles that have stymied change in the past. Despite differences at the peak of government, the Middle East's monarchies and republic-style regimes have much in common. In general, both sets of governments have been ruled by elites who periodically tinker with political liberalization but have repeatedly rescinded whatever concessions they made to the opposition, often within a period of a few years. In Jordan, as in Egypt, the recent past has been characterized by setbacks for political reform and fresh constraints on party pluralism (Diamond 2008: 272; Brownlee 2007a). Like in the 1990s, reform processes have been elastic, with political gains flying from the grasp of the opposition and snapping back into the incumbents' clutches (Kienle 2001). Political institutions for subduing elite conflict and maintaining broad coalitions help to ensure that momentary liberalization does not catalyze more radical changes. The monarchies have intra-familial means of allocating political power and their counterparts benefit from long-standing parties that regulate internal debate (Herb

1999; Brownlee 2007b). Finally, an atmosphere of repression, sustained through massive security agencies, pervades authoritarian regimes across the region, regardless of whether they are headed by presidents or kings (Bellin 2004).

Will monarchies, particularly those with parliaments, lead the way to democratization in the Middle East? Or will they instead rejoin the pack of Arab autocracies and postpone a meaningful shift to popular sovereignty? The present paper explores these forward-looking questions by examining patterns of change and continuity among the region's monarchies and non-monarchies.

### **1. Globally, how do monarchies compare with other regime types in terms of their propensity for regime change?**

For a separate project underway I have composed a dataset that includes over 150 authoritarian regimes during the thirty-year period of 1975-2004. (The set includes the following cases, which I will employ for the current analysis. Monarchies: Bahrain, Iran (under the shah), Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Non-monarchies: Algeria, Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic), Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen.) Using these data I have been testing the effects of different regime types on the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown and democratic transition. The results (to be published as a chapter in Staffan Lindberg's edited volume, "Democratization by Elections?") show no significant differences between monarchies and other authoritarian types. Once we control for level of income, age, and a number of other factors, monarchies are no more likely than their non-monarchical peers to lose power. Further, among those which have relinquished power, monarchies were no more likely to be replaced by electoral democracy. By contrast, a strong portent of democratic transitions is the presence of vigorous electoral competition, "competitive authoritarianism," in *non*-monarchies (Levitsky and Way 2002)

These broad patterns do not provide implications for individual countries, but they are instructive. The most salient characteristic differentiating short-lived and long-lived regimes is the nature of the authoritarian command structure. As shown in Barbara Geddes's survey of authoritarian breakdown, military regimes are much more likely to relinquish power and single-party regimes tend to be more resilient (Geddes 1999). Even after monarchies are incorporated into the universe of cases, that finding persists (Brownlee 2007b: 30-32). Monarchies are not atypically prone to regime change of any kind. Nor have they been especially strong candidates for democratic change. In a global perspective, the shared longevity of Middle Eastern monarchies and non-monarchical regimes sets them together and distinguishes them from the erstwhile autocracies of Latin America and Eastern Europe, as well as from young democracies in sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia.

## **2. Do Middle Eastern monarchies allow more opportunities for free expression and association than the Middle East's republic-style regimes?**

Hopes for political reform in monarchies like Jordan and Morocco rest on the ability of dissidents and organizers to campaign freely for change. One barometer of those opportunities comes with elections and I turn to that aspect of Middle East politics in the next section. Another key indicator is the amount of space available for competing voices, a variable that can be tracked using the annual Freedom House's score for civil liberties. The variable is assigned a value of 1-7, with higher values indicating greater restrictions and scores in the 6-7 range typically coming with regimes that are declared "Not Free." A basic cross-tabulation of regime-years in the dataset shows that periods of significant openness in these Middle Eastern cases are uncommon and only 11% of years received a score of 3 or 4 on the civil liberties scale. In sum, the political topography of the Middle East has been uncongenial to opposition activity. Both sets of regimes are rife with constraints on political expression and association, although the monarchies have a slightly better record overall (mean score of 5.3, as compared to 5.8 for

the non-monarchies). These data look at all of the regimes together, without distinguishing between more and less open regimes. Does the picture change if we hone in on the most promising cases of each set?

**Table 1: Aggregate of Freedom House Civil Liberties Scores in Middle Eastern Regimes**

Civil liberties score	Non-monarchies	Monarchies	Total (percentage)
3	1	3	4 (.8%)
4	19	33	52 (10.4%)
5	81	116	197 (39.2%)
6	88	66	154 (30.7%)
7	75	20	95 (18.9%)
Total	264	238	502 (100%)

Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco are the cases most often cited in discussions of monarchical democratization. For different reasons and at different times Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen have been spotlighted as strong candidates for democratic reform among the Arab republics. Have periods of openness in these two sets of cases been passing phases or were they symptomatic of a broader pattern? Table 2 shows that despite the variations over time, episodes that sometimes received great journalistic and scholarly attention, both sets of cases share long-term tendencies toward limiting the growth and vibrancy of civil society.

**Table 2: Comparative Civil Liberties Data for Selected Arab Monarchies and Republics**

Monarchies	Mean Civil Liberties Score	Republics	Mean Civil Liberties Score
Jordan	5.0	Egypt	5.0
Kuwait	4.5	Tunisia	4.9
Morocco	4.7	Yemen	5.3

Current developments are appropriately considered in the light of these trends. In the *Freedom in the World* report covering the year 2007 all three monarchies scores received scores of 4 in civil liberties while Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen all measured as 5. The cases of Jordan and Morocco have sustained this relatively more open rating for four years running. Were this to continue, or even improve, it would break with past patterns, in which periods of relatively greater openness were transitory but not transformative. Phases in which the civil liberties score dropped — that is, improved — below five have seldom lasted more than a handful of years in the non-monarchies: Egypt (1984-1990), Tunisia (1987-1989), and actually not a single year in Yemen. The monarchies have known similar spells of liberalization — Jordan (1991-1997, 1999-2000), Kuwait (1977-1985 and 1989), Morocco (1977-1980, 1989-1990, 1998-2000) — yet they too have essentially regressed to the mean rather than crossing the threshold into new and sustainable levels of societal autonomy.

### **3. Are the monarchies more prone to providing elections and parliaments?**

Another aspect of political pluralism is the institutional opportunities provided to a regime's opponents to pursue their programs and vie for power. The subfield of hybrid regimes has identified three mutually exclusive and, for that range of the regime spectrum, collectively exhaustive categories:

- a) competitive (electoral) authoritarian;
- b) hegemonic (electoral) authoritarian;
- c) politically closed authoritarian.

One should consult the relevant essays on these types (Diamond 2002; Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002) for an in-depth discussion of their characteristics but the main differences can be summarized here. Politically closed regimes do not allow multiparty competition; hegemonic regimes permit opposition parties to contest elections but the incumbent elite dominate these processes (regularly taking  $\frac{3}{4}$  or more of parliament's seats); competitive authoritarian regimes

have multiparty elections in which the opposition regularly takes a quarter or more of seats and in which elections offer the meaningful prospect for rotation of power.

Diamond's comprehensive classification of regimes for the year 2006 show that the monarchies and non-monarchical regimes of the Middle East span the range of authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 3: The Classification of Middle Eastern Regimes in Authoritarian Subtypes**

	Competitive authoritarian	Hegemonic authoritarian	Closed authoritarian
Monarchies	Jordan Morocco	Kuwait	Bahrain Oman Qatar United Arab Emirates Saudi Arabia
Non-monarchies	Yemen Iran	Algeria Egypt Mauritania Tunisia	Syria Libya

Note: Listing drawn from Diamond (2008: 377).

Monarchies make up some of the most promising and relatively open regimes of the Middle East. They also constitute over two-thirds of the set of closed authoritarian regimes. Moreover, these differences have lasted for decades. If one were to reclassify these cases for 1976, rather than 2006, nearly all of them would fall in the same cell or in a more closed category. (Iran would be on the row for monarchies.) On the flipside, the movement of, say Jordan and Morocco, into more competitive authoritarianism may be read as a sign of progress and liberalization. Still, the authoritarian subtypes are not only static concepts they also describe

<sup>1</sup> For consistency throughout this essay I include here the same cases addressed above, omitting from Diamond's list the competitive authoritarian regimes of Lebanon and Iraq.

national regimes that can be very stable. Arguably the starkest point about this chart is that all of these cases have been on it for so long: they have remained authoritarian, of some sort, rather than joining Turkey and Israel in the listings of democracies.

The only exception to this otherwise uniform persistence of authoritarianism comes from the Arab state of Mauritania, a country that was under a regime much like Egypt's from 1980 until 2005. In 2005 the president was overthrown and for the next two years a military junta led the country. (Hence Diamond labels Mauritania as hegemonic authoritarian in 2006). The caretaker government subsequently held a competitive election and relinquished power. For the year 2007 Freedom House classified Mauritania as an electoral democracy (although the permanence of that designation remains uncertain). The closest regime change to a transition from authoritarianism to democracy in all of the countries of the Arab World, plus Iran, has come in the non-monarchy of Mauritania — a state that moved from a overweening Mubarak-like president to an elected one, via military coup.

#### **4. Are monarchies less durable? Or do they last longer than their counterparts?**

The preceding table hints at how monarchies fare in terms of their longevity relative to non-monarchies. With the notable exception of Iran, none of the monarchies in the dataset was replaced by a new regime, although the Kuwaiti government was interrupted by the Iraqi occupation of 1990-1991 and Qatar's monarchy was momentarily disrupted by a palace coup in 1995. In essence, though, the regime age of today's monarchies is a simple function of their origin date. Specifying a particular year in which the monarchies "began" is a difficult task and subject to revision.<sup>2</sup> Measuring the tenure of regimes from their emergence as modern sovereign states yields the following: Bahrain (1957-present; 50 years), Jordan (1952-present; 55 years), Kuwait (1950-present; 57 years), Morocco (1956-present; 51 years), Oman (1970-

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<sup>2</sup> If one were to date the inception of these regimes to the year in which their ruling families first assumed power, the average tenure would lengthen considerably and bolster the argument I set forth below.

present; 37 years), Qatar (1972-present; 25 years), Saudi Arabia (1953-present; 54 years), United Arab Emirates (1973-present; 34 years). Adding Iran under Mohammed Reza Shah (1953-1979; 26 years) the average tenure of Middle Eastern monarchies, present and past, is 43 years, 2 months, and 3 weeks.

Iran's revolution notwithstanding, these are regimes that predated the "third wave" of democratization and withstood it. Their typical lifespan surpasses the average duration of Geddes's three regime types by a matter of decades. In her data military regimes lasted on average lifespan 8.5 years; the mean duration of personalist regimes was 15.0 years; and single-party regimes, on average, held power for 22.7 years (Geddes 1999: 37). Clearly authoritarian resilience is not inimical to democratization. Mexico, Indonesia, and Taiwan all held power for even longer spans than the typical Middle Eastern monarchy and they all eventually became electoral democracies. However, to the extent that longevity signals entrenchment and incumbent security, the relative seniority of monarchies does not augur well for local and international efforts at genuine liberalization and power-sharing.

What about the rest of the regimes in the Middle East? How does this lifespan compare with the region's non-monarchies? The republic-style dictatorships have had their periods of turbulence, including Tunisia's constitutional coup in 1987 and Algeria's civil war from 1992-1999, but their history of continuity nearly parallels the monarchies' experience. Only the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Mauritania's military coup in 2005 can be considered full-blown regime changes, in the sense of replacing one set of ruling elites and rules with another. The tenure of non-monarchical regimes in the Middle East is: Algeria (1962-present; 45 years), Egypt (1952-present; 55 years), Iran (1979-present; 28 years); Iraq (1968-2003; 35 years), Libya (1969-present; 38 years), Mauritania (1980-2005; 25 years), Syria (1970-present; 37 years); Tunisia (1957-present; 50 years), and Yemen (1978-present; 29 years). Like the monarchies, many of these regimes took power long before the "third wave." Using 2007 as the end date for the ongoing cases, the mean duration of these regimes is exactly 38 years.

This figure is half a decade less than the average lifespan of the monarchies, but well beyond the typical regime tenure observed outside the Middle East. If one were concerned about ossification preventing reform, the republic-style autocracies provide no more cause for hope than the monarchies.

### **5. When monarchies lose power are they more likely to be followed by democracy?**

Based on the preceding discussion a hypothetical path to democratization via monarchism would face significant hurdles. Arguably the most daunting internal challenge is the persistent proclivity of incumbents to retain power rather than share it. The possibility for mutual guarantees cannot be dismissed but as far as the empirical data are concerned, “guarantees” have been, to say the least, asymmetrical and the playing field has been skewed to favor the ruling elites.

If democratization has not emerged from within the system could it be spurred by domestic actors outside the palace, such as through popular protest or domestic military intervention? While researching the effects of hybrid regime types on authoritarian breakdown and democratic transition I have explored this question by comparing the aftermath of regime change: When the regime lost power what replaced it? Another authoritarian regime or a government that at least met the minimal standard for electoral democracy? As in the test of regime breakdown, monarchies did not emerge as significantly distinct from other types of regimes. However, the sample size is too small to venture strong inferences on this particular authoritarian subtype. In the last quarter of the twentieth century few monarchies lost power. Among those that did the shift yielded democracy in only one instance: Nepal. The latest regime change in the Middle East was the relatively promising coup and electoral transition in Mauritania, a non-monarchy.

Another way to consider whether democracy is likely after the monarchies lose power is to look at the earlier history of regimes in the region and the fate of prior monarchies. Here the

record is not encouraging: When kings were swept from power in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), and Libya (1969) their successors established the very authoritarian regimes that match today's monarchies in resilience and guile.

## **Conclusion**

It is both counterintuitive and enticing to cast Middle Eastern monarchs in the role of democratic shepherds. This memorandum has combed the empirical record for evidence of a monarchical vanguard for reform. In terms of the main variables of comparative democratization (civil liberties score, hybrid regime types, longevity) the region's monarchies are nearly indistinguishable from their non-monarchical peers. The two sets of regimes share a record of resilient authoritarianism that includes transitory periods of liberalization and the regular holding of contentious but non-transformative elections. A global view reinforces their commonalities — as unusually long-lived non-democracies — and suggests that the differences between monarchies regarding prospects for democratization may be overdrawn. The impetus for genuine power-sharing seems to have eluded palaces and parliaments alike.

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