

# **The Gulf Monarchies**

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Why the Gulf monarchies have survived, and how they might democratize, are indeed two separate questions: or, perhaps better, the ways in which the Gulf monarchies have survived provides the necessary context for a discussion of how they might democratize. In this memo I treat the two issues sequentially, focusing first on survival, then on democratization.

## **The survival of the Gulf monarchies**

There are a number of reasons that the Gulf monarchies have survived – and still rule – into the twenty-first century.

### **Sovereign statehood**

The Gulf monarchies, in the modern world, appear anomalous. Yet many hundreds of hereditary rulers presided over small chieftaincies and princedoms during the age of European imperialism. Not many, however, survived the end of European rule, and in this regard the five smaller Gulf monarchies, along with the monarchies of Brunei, Bhutan, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Tonga (to name a few) should be seen as the last surviving remnants of the myriad small chieftaincies and princedoms that once ruled much of the world.

Why did they, and not others, manage to join the international state system as fully independent and sovereign states? The proximate cause is that the British, at the end of the empire, did not want to roll these territories up into larger states – this, of course, is what led to the end of hundreds of small Indian hereditary rulers at Indian independence, leaving only a few kingdoms at the periphery of the subcontinent. There was similarly (I believe) some hesitation in incorporating Lesotho and Swaziland into South Africa, and so forth. In the Gulf, of course, it helped that the British did not directly rule Saudi Arabia, the regional state which was the most obvious candidate to swallow up the small Gulf states. And they also had oil, which gave them the capacity to claim statehood (something a place like Qatar would have otherwise lacked) and a reason to avoid their consolidation into larger units. Brunei similarly avoided inclusion in what became Malaysia, so that its sultan is now the ruler of a sovereign state while the sultans of Malaysia are reduced to a largely ceremonial role.

## Family regimes

I once published a book-length study which attempted to explain why the Gulf monarchies have survived in the period since World War II, while other Middle Eastern monarchies have not.<sup>1</sup> The conclusion I came to, in short, was that monarchies are much more likely to survive, in the Middle East at least, when the ruling dynasty monopolizes the leading state posts. There is a tradition in European monarchism to ban members of the dynasty from ministerial positions, and this tradition made it into some of the constitutions of Middle Eastern monarchies: all such monarchies are now republics. In the Gulf, by contrast, governance is a family affair: in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain, the ministries of foreign affairs, interior and defence have, since their inception, been led only by members of the dynasties (with a very few exceptions). Members of the dynasties are scattered throughout the state in other roles, and especially in the key ministries of defense, foreign affairs and the interior. The UAE is a confederation, but Dubai and Abu Dhabi are just as much dynastic regimes as those in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Oman will likely become a full dynastic regime when the current sultan, who took power in 1970, dies.

In past decades the main threat to Middle Eastern monarchies has been military coups (only the Iranian monarchy fell to a popular revolution). The dynastic control of the state has insulated these monarchies from the threat of coups. Jordan and Morocco, the two surviving monarchies in the region in which the family does not form a proto-institution in control of the state, have survived coup attempts that placed the survival of the monarchy in jeopardy. No coup attempts have seriously endangered a Gulf monarchy.

The dynastic regimes of the Gulf are highly dependent upon cooperation among members of the dynasty. The members of these dynasties do in fact cooperate, at least enough to preserve family rule. This is not a result of ties of familial affection, since that can be notably lacking in many of these families. I examined a long series of family disputes in these monarchies, and my core finding was that the members of the dynasties, when a dispute cannot be ignored or postponed, tend to bandwagon rather than balance. That is to say, an overwhelming coalition

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999). See also Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

tends to form around the winner, leaving the loser without enough family allies or power resources to contest his loss in a way that would endanger the long term survival of family rule. The most recent example of this was in Kuwait in 2006 when an overwhelming family coalition backed Sabah al-Ahmad's desire to depose his cousin Sa'd Abdallah.

What are the lessons of this in a larger comparative perspective? In a few cases I think that the findings are perhaps directly applicable, as for example in Brunei. But in general these are – in this respect at least – unusual cases, and they are unusual because of oil. It is not that oil alone explains the survival of the Gulf monarchies. Other monarchies have had plenty of oil, and have nonetheless become republics. Libya is the closest comparison case, and a very convincing argument can be made that the key factor that differentiates Libya from the Gulf monarchies is precisely the success of king Idris in excluding his family from participation in rule at independence in 1951. Nonetheless, Libya also has oil, so the creation of such a dynastic monarchy was a real possibility, and probably would not have been much of a possibility in the absence of oil. Before oil, these polities lacked much in the way of modern political and economic institutions: they did not have cabinets, political parties, labor unions, universities, pressure groups, organized militaries, large corporations, and so forth. They did have families, however, and when oil made it possible to build a modern state virtually overnight, the ruling families managed to capture the state. That is to say, these states moved very quickly from not having organized government ministries of any sort to having well-funded, strong state apparatuses. Members of the ruling family, as the best organized and best placed group at the beginning of modernization, captured the state, and have held onto it with an iron grip ever since (though this is changing in Kuwait). Most monarchies – most countries – do not modernize this quickly, and thus the dynasty has more competitors who have a longer period of time to compete for power.

It should also be noted that the cultural traditions of Arab monarchism contributed to the formation of these regimes. While European succession typically followed the rule of primogeniture, which gave the eldest born son a presumptive claim on power, in the Arab tradition any member of the dynasty (which is defined strictly in the patrilineal line) has a claim to rule. As a consequence aspiring rulers, especially at the dawn of the oil age, had to bargain with other members of their family who also had a claim on power, and part of the resulting bargains was the distribution of money and posts in the state to the ruler's relatives.

## **Stable monarchism in the Gulf and the prospects for democracy**

There are some temporal patterns in the rate and causes of the end of monarchism in the modern world (see table 1). Military coups were the most serious threat to monarchs in the decades following World War II, but the last coup was in 1974 (in Ethiopia). Indeed, until the recent end of the monarchy in Nepal, no monarchy had failed in the past quarter century, since the Iranian revolution of 1979: this is the longest such span of time since the first half of the nineteenth century (when the universe of monarchies is restricted to members of the international state system). Moreover, in the past quarter century and more, the one monarchy that has failed has become not only a republic but also a democracy, while two other authoritarian monarchies have democratized while remaining monarchies (Lesotho and Thailand, the latter of which has gone back and forth from authoritarianism to uncertain democracy).

It appears then that the zeitgeist tends to favor monarchism and, when there is change in monarchies, to favor change in a democratic direction. We can see this, too, in the Gulf. There is little prospect that the Gulf monarchies will make a transition to some other sort of authoritarianism: they will not be overthrown by their militaries or by popular revolutions. Nor will the militaries take power while retaining the monarchy as a figurehead. Instead, if there is to be change, it will likely be change in a democratic direction through the slow accretion of power by an elected parliament.

### **Historical lessons**

How have monarchies democratized in the past, and how can this help us to understand the possible process of democratization in the Gulf monarchies?

The fate of most monarchies in the modern world has been to become authoritarian republics. Only a handful of monarchies have become republics and democratized at the same time: France, Germany after World War I, Italy after World War II, Greece, Nepal recently. Since the Gulf monarchies are quite stable, this is not likely in the Gulf. A number of monarchies have made a transition to democracy while retaining their monarchy: these include Britain, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain, Japan, Thailand and Lesotho.<sup>2</sup> These can be divided into two groups. In the first six the military had no direct role in

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<sup>2</sup> Neither democracy nor republicanism are irreversible, and a few monarchies have complicated histories with

determining who would rule; the gradual transition from monarchical to parliamentary power was not interrupted by foreign occupation, military rule, or bouts of republicanism. In a second and smaller group of monarchies – Thailand, Japan, Lesotho and Spain – these conditions did not hold: monarchical authority did not gradually give way to democratic rule but instead was interrupted by foreign occupation, military rule, republicanism, or some combination of the three. The Gulf monarchies, if they are to democratize, will likely do so following the first path, since their military are safely under civilian (or, more precisely, dynastic) control, and any of the other more complicated routes to democracy seem unlikely.

Thus we are left with, awkwardly enough, six European monarchies that democratized before the First World War as the most relevant comparison cases. I think, however, that these cases are indeed relevant to understanding the nature of any prospective democratic transition in the Gulf monarchies, so long as we focus on the aspects which they share in common. In a great many ways, of course, the politics of Kuwait today bear little resemblance to those of Denmark in the 1870s. But they do share a key commonality in the nature of their governing institutions: both are (or were) monarchies with elected parliaments and constitutions that shared power between the parliament and the monarchy. In both the monarch had the main voice in appointing the cabinet, but the parliament contested the monarch's power. In both the sharing of power between two branches of government caused bouts of governmental paralysis and a general sense that the political system did not work particularly well. In short, there are some intriguing grounds for comparison, so long as focus is maintained on monarchical institutions.

### **Constitutional monarchy**

The European monarchies that made a gradual transition to democracy did so in three stages. They started out as absolutist monarchies (or most did), became constitutional monarchies (in the nineteenth century sense of the phrase) then became democratic monarchies.

The transition from absolutist monarchy to constitutional monarchy was marked by the granting of a constitution.<sup>3</sup> The constitution had to have at least most of several key clauses:

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transitions to and from democracy, and to and from monarchism. Greece is most notable. Nepal, for example, was a democratic monarchy for a period.

<sup>3</sup> The exception, of course, is Britain. It was the model, and the constitutions of constitutional monarchies were

- Provisions setting up an elected representative body.
- A provision that the king was not responsible for anything that his government did, but that his ministers were responsible.
- A requirement that ministers countersign all royal acts.
- A provision to hold ministers accountable for misdeeds as ministers, via impeachment or some similar process.
- A requirement that the parliament pass the budget.

The constitutions of constitutional monarchies gave the monarch the power to appoint the ministers, and this was not meant (initially) to be a nominal power. The monarchs really did initially appoint the ministers, and many (often most) political actors thought that this was an entirely legitimate use of monarchical authority. Yet when citizens began to demand a greater share in political power, deputies in the parliament could use the powers given to the parliament to demand that parties in the parliament, and not the monarch, appoint the ministers. (The formal term for this system, in which parties appoint the government, is parliamentarism, and the term deserves a revival in discussions of Gulf politics.) Thus the parliament could repeatedly impeach or vote no confidence in the king's ministers, or it could refuse to pass the budget. The monarch could respond by refusing the parliament's demands, and if the parliament persisted the political slid into paralysis until one side or the other blinked. Often this was the parliament, but in the end the monarchs all conceded the principle that parliamentary parties would appoint the governments.

These countries were not, of course, the only constitutional monarchies: a wide variety of other countries around the world had constitutions of this sort, from Brazil to Romania to Japan. Some of these constitutions so sharply limited the power of the parliament that they were little improvement on outright absolutism. This is, indeed, the strategy of most Gulf monarchs. Elected majorities of deputies in the parliaments of Oman and Bahrain lack the constitutional power to either block the budget or to vote no confidence in ministers. Tonga has elections but a

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attempts to formalize the British system of government of the first part of the nineteenth century. The most influential of these constitutions was the Belgium constitution of 1831, and it served as a sort of template for constitutional monarchies throughout Europe and around the world.

majority of elected members in the parliament lack the ability to remove ministers or block the budget.<sup>4</sup> An elected majority of the Kuwaiti parliament, by contrast, can vote no confidence in ministers, and has forced the resignation of a number of ministers as a result, including members of the ruling family.

The historical norm, however, has been for a monarch to wind up with a constitution that gives the parliament substantial powers. A king facing an obstreperous parliament could circumvent the constitution in two chief ways. The first is simply to ignore the powers granted to the parliament: the Danish monarchy issued budgets by decree, the Kuwaiti monarchy simply closed the parliament for periods. The second is to steal the elections. This produced a system of government known, in Spain for example, as *rotativism*: the monarch appointed a government, and the government then held elections in which – it was certain – would produce a parliament supportive of the government. In short, the king appointed the minister of the interior, and the minister of the interior appointed the parliament.

As a general rule the higher the degree of government interference in the conduct of elections under a constitutional monarchy the lesser the likelihood that the monarchy would make a gradualist transition to democratic monarchism. In the six early democratizers of northeastern Europe, governments did not typically steal elections (though Britain is something of an exception). In Romania, Bulgaria, Iraq, Spain (before it became a republic), Portugal, Brazil, Italy and elsewhere we can find clear examples of *rotativism*.<sup>5</sup>

The lesson for the Arab monarchies is clear: electoral corruption is bad for constitutional monarchism. Among the surviving Arab monarchies, Morocco has the worst record of electoral corruption, though it has improved in recent years. Jordan and Bahrain also have problems, though the more serious deficiency in their elections lies in systematic malapportionment that ensures that the Palestinian and Shi'i majorities (in Jordan and Bahrain respectively) make up only a minority of deputies in the parliament.

In Jordan and Morocco, too, the monarchs retain a good deal of authority independent of the ministry: for a constitutional monarchy to become a democratic monarchy, the king must rule

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<sup>4</sup> Kerry E. James, "Tonga's Pro-Democracy Movement," *Pacific Affairs* 67 (Summer 1994): 252, 263.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Herb, "Princes and Parliaments in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal* 58 (Summer 2004).

through those the parliament can hold accountable, which is to say his ministers, and not through the palace.

In light of the above I will thus briefly summarize the situation of each of the Gulf monarchies.

### **Oman**

Oman holds relatively free and fair elections to a parliament that has no power. There is a wide suffrage, and while there are restrictions on freedom in campaigning, it is clear that the chief obstacle to movement forward toward democracy in Oman is the Basic Law. It must be reformed to give the parliament some actual authority.

### **Bahrain**

Bahrain's 1973 constitution was modeled after Kuwait's 1962 constitution, and gave the parliament real powers. Those powers were taken away in a unilateral revision of the constitution in 2002 (or thereabouts). The current parliament has some influence, but an elected majority cannot remove a minister.

Bahrain's other serious obstacle to democracy – indeed, the most serious obstacle – is the fact that it has a Sunni regime and a Shi'i majority, and the Sunni regime rules on an explicit and increasingly sectarian basis. The Shi'a are discriminated against in most walks of life. Majority rule would thus also empower an oppressed majority, and the Sunni regime fears democracy for this reason. Western powers, not sympathetic to the Shi'a these days, are happy to leave things as they are.

### **The UAE**

The UAE has a national representative body of sorts, but it has no powers under the constitution. Moreover, deputies are essentially appointed by the rulers of the seven emirates that make up the UAE (the recent "election" of half its members notwithstanding). The transition of the economy of Dubai away from oil, and its corresponding reliance on the labor and business of foreigners, places another barrier in the way of democracy for the 20% of UAE residents who hold UAE citizenship.

## **Qatar**

Qatar's emir issued a constitution in 2005 that calls for national elections to a parliament that will have very few powers. The elections have been repeatedly delayed. The emir is following the Dubai model of development, and the resulting flood of foreigners makes democracy in Qatar a very distant prospect indeed.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia has an entirely appointive National Council that has entirely advisory powers. It is, however, a country with 16 million citizens and these citizens make up a solid majority of the population, so the question of democracy is harder for the regime to avoid – though neither is any sort of transition likely soon. If Saudi Arabia were to move toward democracy, however, it would likely do so on the Kuwaiti model.

## **Kuwait**

Kuwait holds free and fair elections, with a nearly universal franchise, to a national parliament that has substantial powers under Kuwait's 1962 constitution. The ruling family suspended the parliament from 1976 to 1980, and again from 1986 to 1990, and there is talk in Kuwait of another suspension. In the end, however, this is unlikely, and the parliament has become a durable feature of Kuwaiti political life. It has also, in recent years, taken to exercising its constitutional powers with a great deal more vigor than in the past, forcing a number of ministers from office. Yet there is no parliamentary majority in favor of a transition to parliamentarism. The result is a political system in which the parliament has enough power to make it very difficult for the ruling family to rule, but does not actually bear the responsibility for ruling itself. Currently the emir appoints a prime minister, who is always a member of the dynasty. The prime minister (with the advice of the family) then selects the ministers, some of whom are elected members of parliament, most of whom are not. In recent years the prime minister has consulted the political blocs in the Kuwaiti parliament before announcing the cabinet, and for many years the prime minister has included members of various political groupings in the cabinet. The parliament does not give a positive vote of confidence to the new government, and in all but one instance the parliament has used its power to vote no confidence in ministers to target ministers individually, rather than as a body. The exception was over an

issue of electoral reform in the summer of 2006, when a majority of the elected members of parliament declared their support for a vote of confidence in the prime minister himself. The threat was enough to cause the emir to call new elections. The government lost the elections, and the ruling family acceded to the electoral reform demanded by the parliamentary majority.

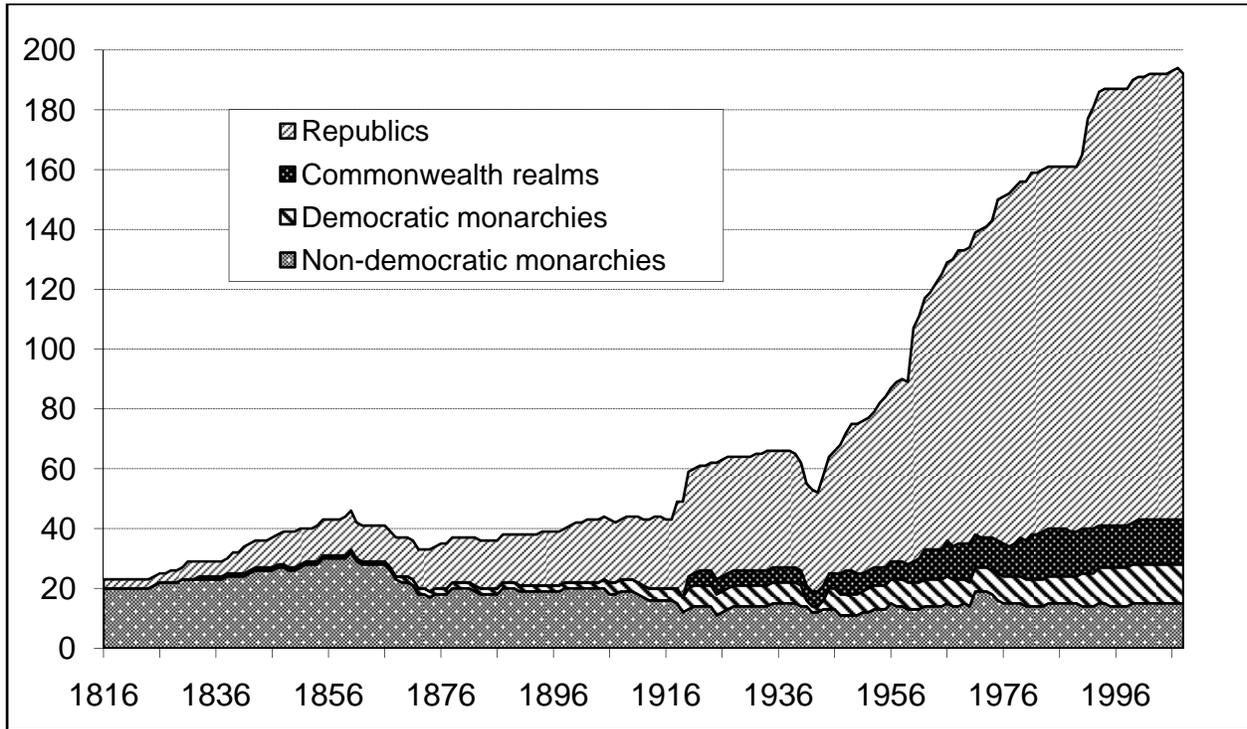
While the opposition can make its voice heard when it unites, the more normal state of Kuwaiti politics is a serious lack of direction. Governments are not homogenous and lack a defined program: they are composed of a mix of members of the dynasty, representatives of various political groups, and technocrats. Many Kuwaitis are not particularly happy with the performance of their political system, and a number of Kuwaitis have noted that one solution to its problems of governance would be a transition to party rule, in which a parliamentary majority forms a government that has the clear support of the parliament. If a transition is made to parliamentarism in the next years – which is possible – it will be motivated not only by a desire for democracy but also by a desire to fix the problems with the lack of direction in the current system.

Kuwait is a pioneer in the Gulf, with the political system that has progressed farthest toward democracy. It is a model, if only because it has followed the most obvious – and at the moment the only available – path toward democracy for the Gulf monarchies. Yet it is often not perceived in a positive light in the Gulf because of the stalemate between the parliament and the ruling family: the cause of democratization in the Gulf would be immensely advanced by a successful transition to parliamentarism in Kuwait.

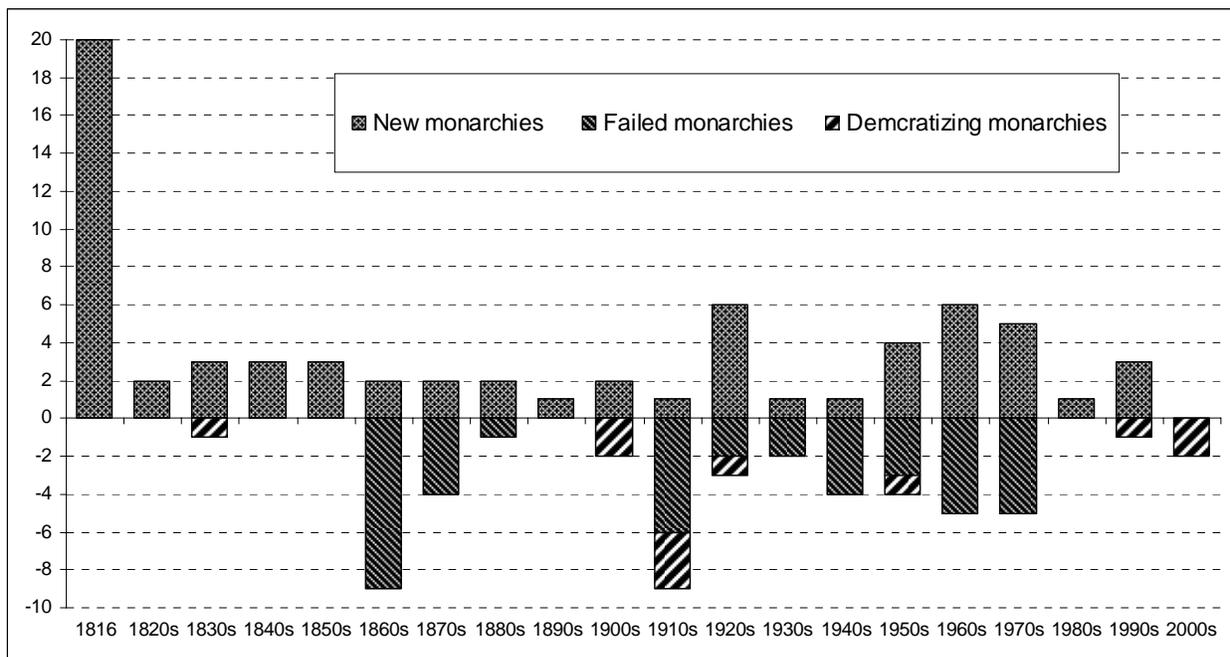
**The most recent transition to democracy or the proximate cause of the most recent end of the monarchy, by decade**

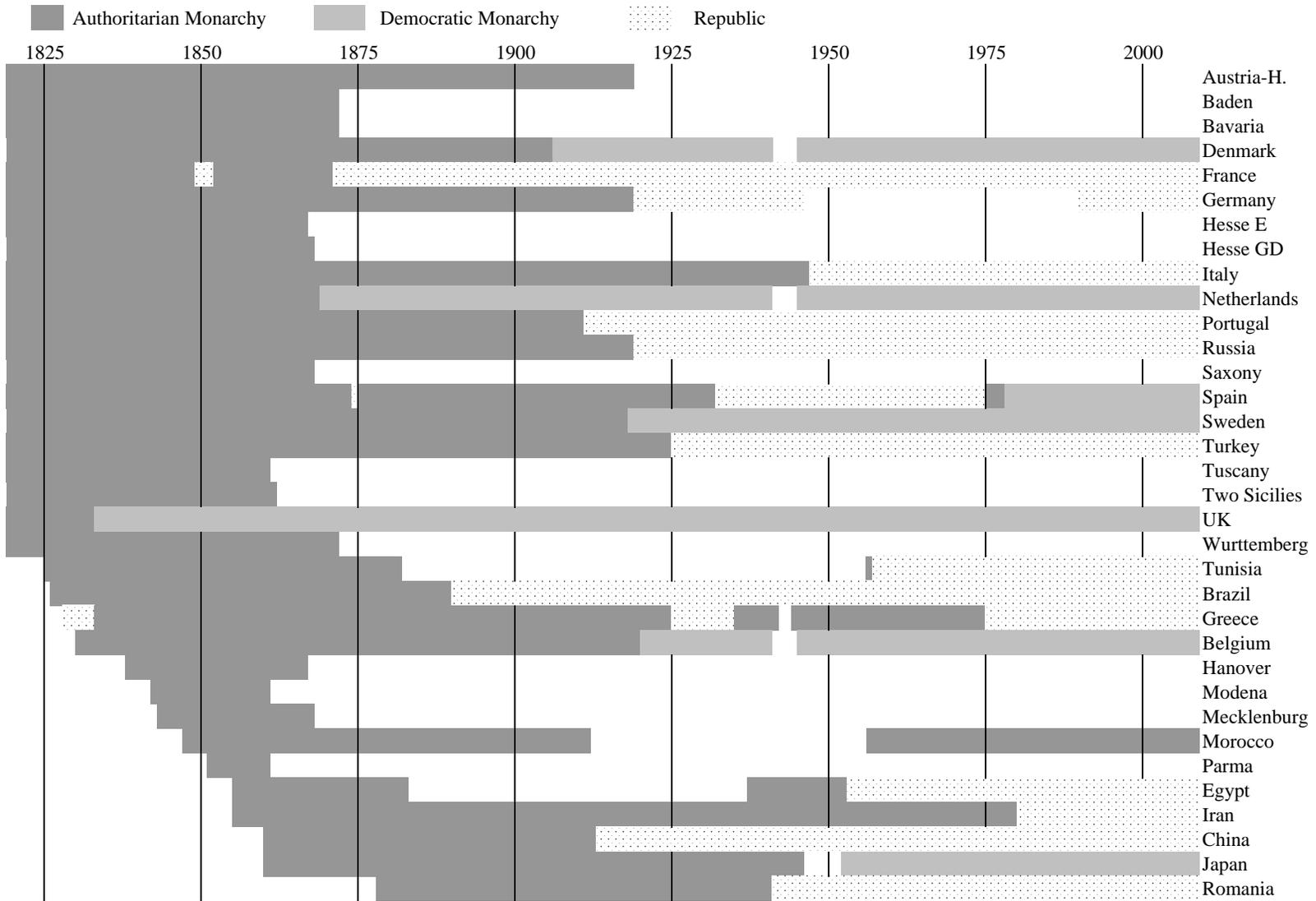
	War with state demise	War	Military coup	Revolution from below	Other (Intra-regime coup, referendum, etc.)	Transition to democracy (most recent)
1816						
1820s						
1830s						UK
1840s						
1850s						
1860s	Modena Parma Tuscany Two Sicilies Hanover Hesse E. Hesse G.D. Mecklenburg Schwerin Saxony				Mexico	
1870s	Baden Bavaria Wurttemberg	France				
1880s			Brazil			
1890s						
1900s						Norway Denmark
1910s	Austria-Hungary Korea	Germany	Portugal	China Russia		Netherlands Sweden Belgium
1920s					Mongolia Turkey	Luxembourg
1930s		Albania				
1940s		Romania Yugoslavia Bulgaria Italy				
1950s			Egypt Iraq		Tunisia	Japan
1960s			N. Yemen Burundi Libya	Zanzibar	Maldives	
1970s			Afghanistan Ethiopia	Laos Iran	Greece	Spain
1980s						
1990s						Lesotho
2000s					Nepal	Thailand

### Number of monarchies and republics in the international state system



### Change in the number of authoritarian monarchies in the international state system, by decade





■ Authoritarian Monarchy

■ Democratic Monarchy

▨ Republic

1825

1850

1875

1900

1925

1950

1975

2000

