Princes and Parliaments in the Arab World

Michael Herb

Several Arab monarchies have held reasonably free elections to parliaments, though all remain authoritarian. This article compares the Arab monarchies with parliaments in other parts of the world, including both those that became democracies, and those that did not. From this I derive a set of prerequisites, potential pitfalls, and expected stages in the monarchical path toward democracy. This helps us to understand not only the democratic potential of the parliamentary experiments in the Arab monarchies, but also the role these parliaments play in the political life of these authoritarian regimes.

The Arab world lacks any democracies, yet we find elected parliaments in several Arab monarchies. Elections to these parliaments are often reasonably fair: if the elected parliaments had more power over the executive, these countries would be democratic, or close to it. What are we to make of these political systems, which are authoritarian by the standard measures, but which also incorporate major democratic elements? In the 1990s, those who study the Middle East looked for signs that the Arab world would join the third wave of democratization. These hopes were dashed — monarchies and republics alike remain authoritarian. More recently, some have suggested that the hints of liberalization seen in recent years have amounted to very little, or in fact have strengthened the existing authoritarian regimes. Daniel Brumberg, for example, finds in the Arab monarchies (and other liberalizing Arab autocracies) a “gradualism whose small steps trace the sad contours of an unvirtuous circle,” which does not offer “a real path forward.”

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In this article I compare the experiences of the existing parliaments in Arab monarchies with the experiences of monarchies with parliaments in other parts of the world. Some of these experiences were successful, in that weak parliaments became strong, and their countries democracies. Elsewhere these parliamentary experiences ended in a transition only to a different type of authoritarianism. These comparisons help us to identify some of the proximate barriers to the achievement of rule by parliamentary parties in the Arab monarchies, and bring crucial evidence to bear on whether, and how, these parliaments offer a way toward a more democratic future.

The discussion of constitutional monarchies offers an insight into a process of democratization that has received little attention in the transitions literature. This literature addresses the clear-cut and relatively sudden transitions of the type found in the third wave in Southern Europe and Latin America, where elections presaged an imminent transition to democracy.\(^2\) This is the sort of transition that many looked for in the Arab world in the 1990s, and I argue here that there is little reason to think that elections will lead quickly to democracy in any of the Arab monarchies. The comparisons with monarchies outside the region also advances our understanding of these — somewhat distinctive, even peculiar — authoritarian regimes.\(^3\) It is true that my analysis, here framed in terms of democratization, verges on what Jason Brownlee calls “democracy forecasting.”\(^4\) Yet, an examination of the role of parliaments in these regimes, and the ways in which they do and do not constrain the executives, helps us to understand how these authoritarian regimes work.\(^5\) Parliaments are centrally important political institutions in these authoritarian regimes, defining the character of the regimes and shaping their relations with citizens.

**CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY**

The historical literature also provides us with a standard term — parliamentarism — to describe a monarchy in which political parties in the parliament determine the composition of the government, with the monarch having little voice. If the suffrage is universal, and the monarch (or an unelected second house) lacks substantial residual powers, such a system is a standard democracy. In this article I am specifically interested in how and under what conditions parliamentarism is achieved. In Kuwait, women cannot vote. This is a serious barrier to democracy, but resolving it involves a

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different process than achieving parliamentarism. 6

In a comparative context, the Arab monarchies with parliaments are constitutional monarchies. This usage has wide acceptance in the historical literature to denote a monarchy with an elected parliament that has not wholly usurped the monarch’s power to determine the composition of the ministry. Unfortunately, the term constitutional monarchy also commonly denotes a democracy decorated by a monarchy — this is true in Arabic as well as in English. Terminological confusion ensues. Yet coining a new term — always to be done with hesitation — is unlikely to make matters clearer.

Like any regime type, though perhaps more clearly, constitutional monarchy is bound to a specific historical context. Its origins are in a nineteenth century attempt to systematize a version of the British model of government suitable elsewhere in Europe. The model was not the British system of the mid-nineteenth century, when Parliament ruled, but instead the British system of the eighteenth century, when the monarchy retained real powers. This model was exported — much as electoral democracy is today — to other parts of the world: the new Balkan states, with their Belgian constitutions and German monarchs, are particularly suggestive examples. Outside Europe, in the period up to World War I, many thought that the secret to European power lay in constitutions and this led to the creation — in form, at least — of constitutional monarchies in the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and (somewhat more successfully) Japan. Today constitutional monarchy is found only in the non-Western world. While it no longer enjoys the international respect it commanded in the nineteenth century, it persists because it provides a useful solution to a problem faced by most monarchs of the modern age: how to allow limited liberalization, while retaining substantial powers for the throne.

There is little explicitly comparative work that attempts to understand the process by which parliamentarism is achieved in constitutional monarchies. Political scientists who have explored the process of transition in earlier democratizers tend to identify democratization with the enfranchisement of the male working class. Dahl, for example, hardly mentions kings or monarchies in his discussion of the earliest democracies in Polyarchy. 7 In fact, political scientists seem to have something of a blind spot for the issue of how parliamentarism is won. This hobbles our understanding of the Arab constitutional monarchies, where democratization is about control of the cabinet more than about the franchise.

Among scholars of Middle Eastern politics, there has been some work on the specific attributes of monarchy in recent years. 8 Several scholars have argued that

8. For a work that looks specifically at constitutions, and raises some of the issues I examine here, see Nathan J. Brown, Constitutions in a Nonconstitutional World: Arab Basic Laws and the Prospects for Accountable Government (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).
monarchism facilitates democratization in the Arab world; these arguments tend to center on the ability of monarchs to create a system of mutual security (to use Dahl’s phrase) that reduces the risks associated with moves toward democracy.9 Yet, there is also much skepticism of the idea that the future of the Arab monarchies holds anything but revolution. In particular, constitutional monarchies mix two principles of political legitimacy, one monarchical and the other democratic. Some doubt the stability of this mixture in the modern world, because monarchical rule lacks legitimacy.10

The logic of a cross-regional comparison of monarchies may give rise to some skepticism. Yet, there are reasons to think a comparison not only makes sense, but is long overdue. Those who wrote the constitutions of the Arab constitutional monarchies clearly found the European experience relevant, because they patterned their constitutions after the European tradition of constitutional monarchy: a reading of the constitutions of Kuwait, Morocco, Bahrain, and Jordan reveals this quite clearly.11 The comparison, moreover, does not require an assumption that the Arab monarchies will recapitulate in every respect the experience of monarchies elsewhere. My argument is simply that profound constitutional similarities make it useful to look at the experiences of monarchies elsewhere when trying to understand the role of parliaments in Arab monarchies.

LESSONS FROM ELSEWHERE

In seven European countries (Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Luxemburg) monarchs surrendered power, over time, to a parliament. This gradual and permanent surrender of monarchical power to parliamentary parties failed in a much larger group of cases, found across most regions of the world. One factor stands out clearly in the successful cases. Government manipulation of elections characterized almost all constitutional monarchies that failed to make a transition to parliamentarism. It was rare in the successful cases.12 The standard political histories of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands make


12. A distinction must be drawn between fraud organized from the center, and the undue influence of local notables: the latter did not destroy the independence of the parliament against the government.
little or no mention of electoral manipulation by governments, even in earlier periods.13 Almost all failed constitutional monarchies suffered from serious electoral manipulation for much of their histories, including those of Iraq, Egypt, Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Brazil, and Hungary. The constitutional monarchies of France, Japan, and Greece also suffered from electoral fraud in substantial periods.14

In Egypt and Iraq, we find a form of politics generally comparable with the experience of constitutional monarchies in places as varied as Brazil, Bulgaria, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Romania (though European powers had a larger role in the Middle Eastern cases). In these countries kings ruled through political parties, in systems that look, on the surface, to be parliamentarian. In the Brazilian constitutional monarchy, when the cabinet became troublesome the king would “name a new, more acceptable ministry, and grant it a dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies.” Elections followed, and “any cabinet presiding over elections to the Chamber of Deputies had to be supremely incompetent if it failed to secure a large majority of seats.”15 Students of Iraqi politics in the monarchical period will recognize this dynamic, which is also found elsewhere: in Bulgaria, at the turn of the century, elections were held “to provide a newly appointed cabinet with a dependable majority in the assembly.”16 In Italy “it was the government which made the election, not elections the government.”17

Electoral manipulation of this sort did not necessarily prevent the emergence, or survival, of parties with some real electoral appeal. But government electoral manipulation had a corrosive effect on parties, and it tended to throw the legitimacy of the entire system in doubt. The Egyptian Wafd, for example, stands out in the history


of Arab political parties for its early vitality and grassroots organization. By the end of the parliamentary monarchy in Egypt, however, it was perceived to be as corrupt as the rest of the political establishment, and was swept away by the Free Officers.\textsuperscript{18} Where elections had some measure of honesty, political actors remained within the system, even though they might strongly protest limitations on the franchise or continued royal power. Where governments stole elections, the answer did not so clearly lie in parliamentary parties and leaders, themselves corrupted by the system.

Once a tradition of electoral manipulation was in place, it was hard to overcome: free elections were held on occasion in some of these cases — and many of these constitutional monarchies lasted for decades — but none managed a durable transition to parliamentarism. In the end, some of these constitutional monarchies fell to coups, others reverted to undiluted absolutism, and still others were destroyed by war. While electoral manipulation no doubt sprang from deeper causes, these deeper causes of the failure of parliamentarism seem to have been manifested in electoral manipulation: the correlation between electoral manipulation and the failure of constitutional monarchies is striking.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Achieving Parliamentarism}

In the successful cases, the achievement of parliamentarism occurred slowly: typically an extended period of negative parliamentary control over the cabinet preceded parliamentarism — the monarchy retained the initiative in appointing the ministers, but had to do so with an eye to the desires of the parliament. Moving from this stage to parliamentarism did not require changing the constitution, so long as it gave the parliament one of two powers: the power to remove ministers or (more commonly) the power to block legislation, particularly the budget.\textsuperscript{20} These constitutional powers were negative — the parliament could paralyze government, but the king retained the nominal power to appoint the cabinet. Parliamentarism was achieved when kings realized that any cabinet without parliamentary support could not govern.

\begin{enumerate}
\item There are a few exceptions. Elections in imperial Germany were quite free, with universal male suffrage. The monarchy was destroyed by the First World War, and was followed by a fragile democracy. See Mark Hewitson, "The Kaiserreich in Question: Constitutional Crisis in Germany before the First World War," \textit{The Journal of Modern History}, Vol. 73, No. 4 (December 2001); Stanley Suval, \textit{Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). Elections in the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy, while flawed, were not regularly stolen by the government. Conflict between nationalities blocked the formation of a coherent party governments. William A. Jenks, \textit{The Austrian Electoral Reform of 1907} (New York: Octagon Books, 1974).
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and that there was little option but to allow parties to appoint the government.  

Sometimes, however, monarchs simply ignored the constitution. Of course, this held risks: the opposition could call strikes, lead demonstrations, form rifle clubs (in Norway and Denmark) and even threaten revolution. Nonetheless, the threat by kings to circumvent the constitution could moderate the demands of parliamentary deputies.

In other cases, however, the moderation of parliamentary deputies seems to have reflected the lack of enthusiasm for parliamentarism in the electorate. We can attribute this, in part, to limitations on the suffrage, which typically existed throughout the period in which parliamentarism was achieved (except in Denmark). This raises the possibility that the sort of sustained balance between the Monarch and the Parliament that occurs in constitutional monarchies cannot be maintained in the presence of full suffrage.

Parliamentarism also required parties. A parliament of constantly shifting factions, or a collection of independents, could defeat a government on specific issues, or vote ministers out of office, but it could not formulate a program or form a government itself. Only parties could make parliament's preferences durable, and give parliament the ability to dictate the composition of the ministry to the Monarch. Finally, the king had to delegate his powers to the ministry, in reality as well as formally. He could not run a parallel government from the court. In practice, it appears that kings often delayed surrendering effective control over the ministries of foreign affairs and the military.

PRINCIPES AND PARLIAMENTS IN THE ARAB MONARCHIES

There are six constitutional monarchies in the Arab world today: Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. Two monarchies remain absolutist: the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Local elections have been promised in Dubai, and there has been much recent talk of reform in Saudi Arabia. The discussion above suggests some of the major barriers to parliamentarism that may — or may not — be present in the Arab constitutional monarchies today.

• Governments that steal elections.
• Constitutions that provide insufficient powers to the parliament.
• An electorate that does not desire parliamentarism.


22. See for example Verney, Parliamentary Reform, p. 234.

Monarchs who violate the constitution by either closing the parliament, or by refusing to recognize its powers.

- An absence of political parties or parliamentary blocs.
- Distortions in the electoral system that lead to an underrepresentation of the opposition in the parliament.

In the following sections I will examine these barriers to parliamentarism in each of the Arab constitutional monarchies, and I will follow this with some comments on Saudi Arabia.

**Kuwait**

The constitution does not pose a barrier to parliamentarism in Kuwait. A majority of the elected deputies in the unicameral majlis al-umma can remove confidence in individual ministers (following an interpellation, or istijwab). A majority can also declare that it cannot work with the Prime Minister. In the latter case the Amir chooses whether to dismiss the government or the Parliament; if the Parliament again votes against the Prime Minister, he loses his job.

The government does not steal the elections. They are reasonably fair (though with a certain amount of vote-buying), and the Parliament reflects the state of public opinion — among men — in Kuwait. The way in which electoral districts are drawn tends to favor pro-government candidates, but not overwhelmingly so.

Expansion of the suffrage to women, while a necessary step, would not likely result in more pressure for parliamentarism.

The majlis al-umma exercises a strong negative constraint over the government, and its composition. Since 1992 the Kuwaiti Parliament has used its powers to force ministers from office, and to influence the choice of new ministers. In 1998, to avoid the imminent removal of confidence in a minister from the ruling family, the government resigned.

Earlier, in 1994, the ministers of interior and defense (both shaykhs of the ruling family) swapped posts when one ran into serious trouble with the majlis al-umma. In the cabinet shuffle following the 1999 elections another shaykh left the cabinet, also under the threat of interpellation. The Prime Ministers formulate the

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24. Articles 101 and 102. Ministers, who sit in Parliament even if they are not elected members, cannot vote on motions of confidence.


composition of cabinets so as to include important groups, in hopes of inoculating the cabinet against interpellations. Yet, while there is no reason to trivialize the substantial influence the majlis al-unma has over the Kuwaiti cabinet, neither does the Parliament determine who will hold cabinet posts.

In part, this may be because deputies make a strategic choice to avoid challenging the ruling family. In 1986, the various blocs in Parliament demonstrated an unusual unity, and set out to remove confidence in the Minister of Justice, who was a shaykh of the ruling family. The vote was not taken — the Minister resigned, and the Amir then closed the Parliament.30 Yet, in recent years the threat of an unconstitutional suspension of Parliament seems to have receded. Certainly the ruling family appears to be willing to tolerate the status quo, in which the majlis al-unma imposes a strong set of constraints on government actions and ministerial appointments, but does not rule. In March 2004, the Parliament appeared to have mustered the votes to remove the Minister of Finance from office, and the Prime Minister responded by saying that this was a “natural” part of Kuwaiti political life.31 Suspending parliamentary life could have serious costs for the ruling family in a society in which political elites from all sections of society have an investment in parliamentary life, and in which there are no ideological, sectarian, or tribal groups providing a reliable reservoir of support for absolutism.32

The threat of suspension is not the only factor holding deputies in check. Only a minority explicitly wants parliamentarism. The Parliament is divided into a number of blocs: the largest, the Islamist bloc, has around 14 members. Other blocs include the populist Popular Bloc, the liberals, the independents (typically fairly close to the government), and deputies of the ‘Awazim tribe. But of these blocs, only the Popular Bloc is primarily concerned with challenging the ruling family, while the liberals and Islamists display more desire to do combat with each other than with the monarchy. The government thus can typically draw on the support of one or another of the opposition groups, in addition to the pro-government deputies, in defending ministers subjected to a vote of confidence. Thus, the liberals — long the bulwark of the Kuwaiti opposition — came to the rescue of ministers in 2000 and 2002, voting with the government.33 Even were the opposition united, it is not clear that a majority of deputies would support a real push for parliamentarism. The opposition, in its various flavors, has won only around half of the seats in recent elections. The remainder go to deputies inclined to support the government to one degree or another. The electoral system encourages this, but is not a sufficient explanation: if Kuwaitis felt strongly about it, they could vote for parties, and for opposition candidates. They, in fact, do

not. This strongly suggests that, at least in Kuwait, the twin principles of monarchical and popular legitimacy can coexist, despite virtually full manhood suffrage.

In Kuwait, as in the other Gulf monarchies, members of the ruling family hold the portfolios of Defense, Foreign Affairs, Interior, as well as the post of Prime Minister. These posts do not appear, today, beyond the risk of interpellation. Yet parliamentarism cannot be achieved without removing the dynasty from these posts, and this is not a trivial issue: the balance of power within the ruling family depends on the allocation of these posts to its members. A concerted parliamentary effort to strip these posts from the family would likely run into serious resistance. Yet, today it is not clear where the ruling family would draw a line, because the opposition in Parliament is neither united enough or strong enough to push the ruling family to its limit. This is not so much because the Parliament fears the reaction from the ruling family as that the opposition cannot consistently muster the votes to find these limits.

**BAHRAIN**

In Bahrain, the constitution is itself an obstacle to parliamentarism. The new 2002 constitution specifies that the elected lower house (the majlis al-nuwwab) can remove a minister — or declare its inability to work with the Prime Minister — only with a two-thirds majority. The elected lower house cannot block legislation, except unanimously: the constitution provides for an appointive upper house of equal numeric strength (40 members), and disputes between the two houses are decided by a joint vote. These constitutional provisions are powerful obstacles to progress toward democracy in Bahrain — the previous constitution, of 1973, was modeled after Kuwait’s, and the current one is a step backward. On a more positive note, the government does not manipulate the process of counting ballots.

The most serious barrier to parliamentarism in Bahrain is sectarian. Bahrain has a Shi’i majority, while the ruling family is Sunni — its rule originated in the 18th century conquest of Bahrain. The 1990s saw widespread disturbances among the Shi’i population, and violent repression by the ruling family. The violence, and related moves such as naturalizing Sunnis from outside the country, exacerbated the sectarian divide in Bahrain. Clearly, this poses a major barrier to any future democratization, which requires not only a devolution of power by the ruling family, but also the granting of substantial political power to the Shi’i majority. Even more clearly than in the other cases, any determined effort by the Parliament to demand parliamentarism would result in a suspension of the Parliament. The ruling family has firm control of the instruments of state coercion, and proved its ability to survive a popular uprising in the 1990s. The leading Shi’i opposition group, the Jam’iyya al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Islami, has a good understanding of the limits of the situation. It has demanded a return to the 1973 constitution, but has also made it clear that it accepts the Al Khalifa

34. Herb, *All in the Family*.
monarchy, and seeks change through peaceful reform.36

Bahrain has had two experiences with parliaments, the first from 1972 to 1975, and the second from 2002 to the present. Both Parliaments have challenged the government, though not primarily on sectarian lines. Of the 30 elected members of the 1972 body, 16 were Shi‘i.37 The ruling family suspended the Parliament when it refused to approve a restrictive state security law, but both Sunnis and Shi‘a (in the nationalist opposition) led the fight against the law, and it did not become a sectarian issue.38

Of the 40 elected members of the 2002 majlis al-nuwwab, a mere 12 are Shi‘i, as a result of a boycott by al-Wifaq in protest of the weakening of parliamentary powers in the 2002 constitution.39 Despite its constitutional weaknesses and the absence of the Shi‘i opposition, the current majlis al-nuwwab has proven more obtrusive than anticipated. In 2003, the majlis al-nuwwab conducted a major inquiry into losses in the government’s retirement funds, and 17 deputies demanded to interpellate three ministers. Despite government misgivings, the interpPELLation of the Minister of Finance took place in late April. In 2003, the majlis al-nuwwab conducted a major inquiry into losses in the government’s retirement funds. In early 2004, 17 deputies demanded to interpellate three ministers. These deputies included members of the two largest political blocs, the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis.40 The majlis al-nuwwab interpellated the Minister of Finance in late April, but by the end of May the three interpellations had fizzled out. The Sunni Islamist blocs did not support a formal vote of confidence in the minister of finance or a second minister. The third got off on a technicality, but one that the deputies should have known about; in Bahrain, as elsewhere, a minister can be interpellated only on matters concerning the cabinet post he currently holds.41

The sectarian divide in Bahrain makes parliamentarism an especially distant possibility. Democracy is hard to achieve when it involves the surrender of power by a minority, in the context of sectarian polarization. Yet, given the intractable nature of the sectarian divide that exists in Bahrain, an elected Parliament offers perhaps the

36. See for example the interview with ‘Ali Salman, the head of the al-Wifaq, in al-Hayat, October 23, 2002; and his comments reported in al-Wasat, May 22, 2004.
41. Al-Ayyam (Bahrain), May 26, 2004; Al-Wasat, January 21, April 21, 22, 25, and 26, 2004; Akhbar al-Khalij, March 9, April 21 and 22, 2004.
most promising avenue for giving the Shi‘i majority a voice in government and, in the long term, reducing the salience of the sectarian divide in Bahraini politics.

QATAR

In June of 2004, Qatar’s Amir finally issued the country’s new constitution, which Qatar’s citizens had overwhelmingly approved in a referendum in April 2003. The constitution, however, will not come into effect until it is published in the official gazette. The Amir, citing the need to prepare, said that this would require a full year. Under the new constitution, Qataris will elect the the unicameral majlis al-shura, but it will enjoy few powers compared to the parliaments of Kuwait, Jordan, or Morocco. The new parliament will be able to remove confidence in ministers, but only with the assent of two-thirds of its members. Since the Amir will appoint 15 of the 45 deputies, removing confidence in a minister will require unanimity among the elected deputies, short of a revolt among the appointed members.\(^\text{42}\) Elected members have a slightly better chance of rejecting legislation, which requires a simple majority of all members present. Even then, the constitution gives the Amir wide powers to issue laws when the Parliament is not in session, and these can be rejected by the majlis al-shura only with a two-thirds majority.\(^\text{43}\) In short, this is a Parliament of a very different sort compared to that found in Kuwait. One thing can be said in favor of the Qatari experience: the government avoided interference in the municipal elections of 1999 and 2003, and probably will continue this tradition in the upcoming parliamentary elections, if only because the deputies will have little power to constrain the monarchy, beyond using the Parliament as a soapbox.

OMAN

Oman’s majlis al-shura is truly advisory, with no powers whatsoever specified in the Basic Law. Oman held its first elections with a universal suffrage in October 2003 — previous elections had been held with a limited electorate. While there were no accusations of manipulation of the balloting, the government sharply restricted the ability of candidates to hold meetings and announce platforms: it was viewed as a sign of progress that the government allowed candidates to distribute their biographies to voters.\(^\text{44}\) An election in such circumstances does not allow for the real expression of the electorate’s opinion. While Oman, like Qatar, has a history of incremental steps forward, a substantial number of steps will be needed even to reach the point where Kuwait is today. Candidates must be able to campaign freely in elections, and the Parliament must be given substantial constitutional powers.

\(^{42}\) Articles 77, 111.
\(^{43}\) Articles 70, 100. Issuing laws when parliament is not in session is a favored tactic of Arab monarchs, and has been an issue in Kuwait and Jordan.
\(^{44}\) Al-Hayat, October 4-5, 2003; Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, October 4, 2003.
JORDAN

In Jordan, as in Kuwait, the Parliament has substantial powers. An absolute majority of the deputies in the elected lower house (the majlis al-nuwwab) can remove confidence in a ministry, forcing it from office. New governments must secure a positive vote of confidence. In recent elections, the government has not directly manipulated the results of balloting. Jordan has experienced two periods of relative political opening: one in the 1950s and 1960s, and another since 1989. Elections in the 1950s and 1960s ranged from reasonably fair (1956) to outright stolen by the government (1963). The four elections since 1989 (the most recent in 2003) have been “relatively free and fair,” without the sort of pervasive manipulation seen in many of the failed constitutional monarchies. The real problem with the electoral system is instead malapportionment. A majority of Jordanians are of Palestinian origin, and live in urban areas — Amman, Zarqa, and Irbid. These areas elect few deputies, in proportion to the number of eligible voters living in them. Thus in 2003, districts with approximately 27% of the eligible voters elected half of the deputies. This malapportionment saps the legitimacy of the Parliament. Disparities in voter turnout suggest the size of the problem: while turnout in 8 of 13 governorates exceeded 77%, turnout of eligible voters amounted to a far more modest 43% in Amman and 48% in Zarqa.

Despite the limitations of the electoral system, since 1989 the majlis al-nuwwab exerts a measure of influence over the composition of the cabinet. This has included parliamentary attacks on Prime Ministers, though this is easier in Jordan than in Kuwait because Jordanian Prime Ministers usually do not belong to the ruling family.

In 1991, Parliament brought down a government, though not by directly using its power to withdraw confidence. Even the Parliament elected in the 1997 elections

45. Articles 53 & 54.
48. Author’s calculations, based on election data from the Web site www.electionsjo.com, (accessed April 20, 2004). The calculation omits the 6 seats reserved for women, which were allocated in a way that mirrored the malapportionment in the other 104 seats.
(boycotted by the main Islamist party) did not lack vitality — it too brought down a government, also indirectly, in 2000. In that episode, a parliamentary majority signed a petition demanding a special session of Parliament (not then in session) to remove confidence in the government. The deputies also threatened to prevent a quorum for a special session of Parliament needed to pass pressing economic legislation. The King responded by dismissing the government and appointing a leader of the rebellious deputies to form a new one. Nonetheless, this was not quite as vigorous an exercise of parliamentary power as it may appear at first blush. The Prime Minister had lost popularity not only in the majlis al-nuwwab, but also apparently in the court. A cabinet crisis in 1994 revealed a similar dynamic, in which opposition elements in the court and in the majlis al-nuwwab united against a ministry. The Parliament has enough power to oblige the King to find prime ministers who can manage the majlis al-nuwwab, but there is little apparent demand for parliamentarism.

More recently, in 2003, two separate governments won votes of confidence in the majlis al-nuwwab with overwhelming majorities (84 and 85 votes, of 110, respectively). Yet, while the majlis al-nuwwab has passed recent votes of confidence by large margins, it has been less accommodating in passing legislation. Most notably, it refused to raise the penalties for honor killings, and has balked at approving other royal decrees issued in the absence of Parliament. This has placed a substantial barrier in the way of reform, but the majlis al-nuwwab has not used its power to block legislation to demand a greater voice in the formation of the cabinet.

The threat of suspension provides a powerful check to the ability of the Jordanian Parliament to challenge the monarchy. The most recent unconstitutional suspension of the Parliament ended only in 2003. The King dissolved Parliament in 2001, then delayed elections on the grounds that districting reforms had to be implemented, and because the regional situation (unsettled, to be sure) militated against elections. While the Jordanian monarchy prefers to have a Parliament, the power of the monarchy is permanent, and that of the Parliament contingent.

Morocco

In several formal respects, the Moroccan experience appears a good deal more advanced than those in Jordan and Kuwait. The Parliament enjoys powers comparable to those of its Jordanian counterpart: a majority of the elected deputies can remove confidence in a ministry, and new governments must secure a positive vote of confi-

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dence. The party system is the most developed among the monarchies; party lists were used in the 2002 elections, discouraging the independents found in other Arab monarchies and strengthening parties. Even more impressively, the King called on the opposition parties to form a government in 1998, and the leader of the opposition USFP (al-Itihiad al-Ishtiraki) held the post of Prime Minister until 2002.

In the end, however, the Moroccan experience is more reminiscent of that of the failed constitutional monarchies than of the successful ones. Morocco stands out among the existing Arab monarchies for the prevalence of fraud in its parliamentary elections. Election results, especially in the past, have owed as much to the machinations of the Interior Ministry as to the will of the electorate. Voter turnout has suffered accordingly. This has led to serious corrosion of the party system, and has thrown into doubt the legitimacy of the Parliament. Nonetheless, the trend is positive. King Muhammad VI (who came to power in 1999) staked some of his credibility on the fairness of the 2002 elections, and they met a higher standard than previous efforts. Yet the Islamist party, which did very well in the elections, decided beforehand to run candidates in only 56 of the 91 electoral districts, thus not only reducing the threat it posed to the monarchy and the existing elite, but also minimizing the degree to which the elections clearly represented popular opinion. In the 2003 municipal elections, the government “prevailed on” the Islamist party to run candidates in only 15% of the 24,000 constituencies. A more radical Islamist party, which might or might not have garnered significant votes, did not participate in the 2002 parliamentary elections.

The experience with the opposition government also looks less impressive when we consider the limits on the Prime Minister’s power. In practice, the King wields many powers directly, particularly over the ministries of sovereignty. This is at the expense of the Prime Minister when Muhammad VI removed Driss Basri (his father’s strongman Interior Minister) and named a replacement, the Prime Minister learned of the event only after the fact. The King, in a 2001 interview, found it necessary to deny that there were two governments, one inside the palace and one outside, all the while asserting that the king had “special responsibilities” for foreign affairs, defense,


the interior, religious affairs, and justice.\textsuperscript{63} Moroccan kings have long held the defense portfolio personally.

The political parties' connections to the electorate often seems tenuous, and by appointing an "opposition" government in 1998 the King did as much to co-opt the opposition as he did to turn over power to it.\textsuperscript{64} The aftermath of the 2002 elections put the limitations of the system in sharp perspective. The elections resulted in a fractured lower house with the four largest parties each controlling between 41 and 50 of the 325 seats.\textsuperscript{65} The parties began building coalitions in earnest, and two major, and fairly evenly balanced, blocs emerged, with the Islamist party a key part of the right-leaning bloc.\textsuperscript{66} Had this process continued, Morocco might have found itself with a relatively clearly defined governing coalition and a distinct opposition. Yet the King ended the process of coalition formation by asking a technocrat to appoint a cabinet. The blocs dissolved as parties rushed to join the government: of the larger parties, only the Islamist party remained in the opposition. The result tended to confirm the skeptics' view of the entire political élite — with the possible exception of the Islamists — as creatures of the regime.\textsuperscript{67} The system strikingly resembles the nominal parliamentarism of the failed constitutional monarchies. Though, again efforts to clean up Morocco's elections suggest some grounds for limited optimism.

\textbf{SAUDI ARABIA}

Saudi Arabia has not held nationwide elections. The King appoints all members of Saudi Arabia's national assembly, the \textit{majlis al-shura}, and the body lacks any real powers to constrain the Monarchy. In the spring of 2004, it was regarded as progress that journalists would be allowed to attend its sessions, and that two hours of its weekly deliberations would be broadcast.\textsuperscript{68} Since early 2003, however, talk of reform in Saudi Arabia has substantially increased. Petitions have circulated calling for elections, and one for a "constitutional monarchy."\textsuperscript{69} The Crown Prince has called for elections for half the seats on regional advisory councils, though he has also complained that the bureaucracy (and other members of his family) have blocked movement on this reform. The ruling family seems to have split on the issue, with one wing, led by Crown Prince Abdallah, favoring reform, while another, associated with

\textsuperscript{63} Al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 24, 2001.
\textsuperscript{64} Ben Mih, "Le Champ Politique Marocain," pp. 4-13.
\textsuperscript{66} Al-Hayat, October 11, 2002.
\textsuperscript{67} It hardly helped that when the Prime Minister selected "younger faces" for the cabinet, he wound up with the sons and daughters of party leaders and former cabinet ministers. Al-Hayat, November 8, 2002.
\textsuperscript{68} Al-Hayat, March 16 & 20, 2004.
\textsuperscript{69} This petition can be found on various websites. See www.islamonline.net/Arabic/doc/2004/02/article02_20.SHTML (accessed April 20, 2003).
the Minister of Interior, Prince Naif, opposing it. The incapacity of the King prevents the resolution of the conflict, and the advanced age of all the major players makes it difficult to make predictions concerning how it will in the end be resolved. Should Abdallah assume the kingship in good health, however, reforms will likely move forward.

The experiences of the other monaracies offers some things to look for in any future Saudi experience with parliamentary reforms. First, the constitution matters. A Parliament with the powers of that in Kuwait offers much more promise for movement forward than one in the Qatari mold. Second, while we can anticipate that elections will follow the Gulf model of procedural fairness, any electoral exercise is useful only if candidates can campaign and take public positions on the issues (as is not the case, for example, in Oman). Third, even should a parliament receive substantial powers on the Kuwaiti or Jordanian models, parliamentarism will not likely ensue. The threat of suspension will limit the ambitions of deputies. Some parts of the electorate will have limited enthusiasm for a quick transition to the rule of parliamentary parties. And political parties — or non-party blocs, of the sorts found elsewhere in the Gulf — are not likely to win a majority of the seats. Tribal, sectarian, clan and provincial loyalties are as strong in Saudi Arabia as they are in Jordan or Kuwait, and it would be odd, indeed, if the ruling family did not design an electoral system that would emphasize these loyalties and discourage electoral blocs.

CONCLUSIONS

A comparison of the currently existing Arab monarchies with those in other parts of the world does not allow us to predict whether or not the Arab monarchies will become democratic. It does, however, provide us with some insights to the democratic potential of these parliaments, and it can help us to understand better the role of elected Parliaments in these authoritarian regimes. The absence of direct government manipulation of elections in the Arab monarchies (except Morocco) offers the most encouragement: in other constitutional monarchies this has kept the political opposition engaged in the political process. Thus, the habit of Arab monarchies of suspending parliaments when opposition challenges become too sharp may not be quite so harmful as it seems at first glance. Historically, many monarchs have instead stolen the elections. This delegitimizes the parliament. Closing an honestly elected Parliament, by contrast, typically impels the opposition to demand the resumption of parliamentary life.

The comparison with monarchies elsewhere also allows us to identify a crucial distinction among the constitutions of the Arab constitutional monarchies. In Jordan, Morocco, and Kuwait, the constitution gives the Parliament the powers necessary to achieve parliamentarism — though, of course, other barriers remain. This is not true of Bahrain and Qatar, where parliaments lack substantial powers.

Kuwait, in particular, stands out. The Parliament enjoys a substantial degree of legitimacy among the citizen population. Those who are excluded — notably women — focus their efforts on gaining admission, not on attacking the institution. The failure of the Kuwaiti majlis al-unma to achieve parliamentarism must be traced not only to the reluctance of the ruling family (which is less pronounced than in any other Arab monarchy) but also to the fact that the electorate seems more focused on battles between Islamists and liberals than on reducing the powers of the ruling family. The state of affairs in Jordan is less promising, where the Parliament suffers from a lack of legitimacy among many Jordanians of Palestinian descent, due to electoral malapportionment. Yet, malapportionment is better than stealing the elections, if one must choose one’s poison. Morocco, while giving the formal appearance of being much farther ahead of the other cases, resembles many of the failed constitutional monarchies in the Arab world and elsewhere — systems in which monarchs allowed the form of parliamentarism but deprived it of its substance by interference in the elections and by denying the Prime Minister the authority to rule.

The Parliaments of the Arab monarchies are not mere façades — while we can hardly predict the eventual achievement of parliamentarism, neither can we rule it out. If the tradition of free elections is maintained, and with constitutional improvements in some of the monarchies, the Parliaments hold out promise for the transformation of these political systems in a more democratic direction.