

# The Political Impact of Social Media on the Arab Gulf: Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

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## The Political Impact of Social Media on the Arab Gulf: Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

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### The Political Impact of Social Media on the Arab Gulf

#### Emerging Dialogues in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

Political developments in the Arab Gulf states have been multifarious and, for the most part, incoherent. Commentators of the region are opposed in their analysis: whilst some focus on fragmenting social contracts[1], others indicate the strength of rich monarchies in adapting to appease citizens and disrupt protests[2]. This paper attempts to place social media resources within the context of an evolving political dynamic. By deepening civil society, I argue that this process can facilitate politically liberalising reforms, although reactionary tendencies can be exploited by divisive regimes. Ultimately the impact of social media is inseparable from its environment: neither Bahrain nor Saudi Arabia encourages self-determination, but the collective pressures will combine with broader state-society dialogues that shall engender the widening of political space.

#### Social Media within the System

The recent wave of uprisings that inflamed the Arab world since 2010 both revealed and developed a growth in grass roots political awareness and an emerging drive for inclusive political systems – what Lynch has termed the ‘new Arab public sphere’[3]. He argues that new media has transformed the emerging Arab generation in three fundamental ways: pluralising ideas and opinions, enhancing popular expectations, and developing a collective Arab political space[4]. Investigating this impact upon political systems, my focus is on social media, which the OED defines as “web sites and applications which enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking”[5]. As a process within the Arab Gulf, I more specifically examine the *socialisation of media*: this is the mechanism which precipitated the emergence of civil space that Lynch and others have analysed. This reconfigures the popular relationship with conventional media, increasing the plurality of voices, enhancing popular interaction, and facilitating “political and civic engagement”[6]. Social Movement Theory provides a useful framework to comprehend this object-process duality, enabling us to define social media platforms primarily as ‘socio-organisational’ resources[7] – appropriable apparatuses which can be used for political ends. They extend – and sometimes create – the utility of other objects as moral or cultural resources: protest techniques are disseminated across Facebook and martyr narratives ‘go viral’[8]. Moreover, social media are broadly fungible, applicable to every theatre and useful for numerous applications.

The political impact of social media must be understood in terms of resources within a broader system. The authority of Gulf regimes is captured by Davidson’s ‘ruling bargain’, in which citizens “choose to remain politically acquiescent in return for sufficient stability and services from their governments”[9]. Legitimacy has a greater or lesser role within the political framework depending upon the significance of other factors, such as rentier dominance or an entrenched security apparatus: but arguably all Gulf regimes, to avoid total repression of their citizens, must earn ‘the consent of the governed’. They have pursued this objective through stylised mechanisms that characterise the region, involving wealth transfers from government to society, neopatrimonial veneers of modern governance, and cultural-religious resources[10].

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The regimes are fundamentally durable institutions which, by regulating succession according to primogeniture, ideologically promote unchallenged leadership[11]; moreover, dynastic networks within ruling families ensure stability and cohesion from within[12]. As sheikhdoms around the Arabian Peninsula were based on communal tribalism before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nascent leaders required the furnishings of rentier wealth to sufficiently elevate their status within society and consolidate their authority[13]. Midway through the century, significant hydrocarbon revenues accruing directly to the regimes created an economic structure that de-politicised society by separating citizens from meaningful production[14], thus making the populations dependent on their rulers for redistributed wealth, which encouraged support of their survival[15]. However, the fragility of traditional rentier politico-economic policies – endangered by a demographic bulge and dwindling hydrocarbon reserves[16] – has undermined the de-politicisation approach, repositioning legitimacy as a crucial component of ruling bargains in the Arab Gulf: indeed, socioeconomic frustrations and poor governance were found to be fundamental factors in driving the 2011 Arab uprisings[17].

Yom and Gause offer a modified theory for understanding modern monarchical rule in the Middle East. As regimes increasingly need to ‘prove their worth’ to citizens, the authors reconceive political authority as a *strategic* outcome rather than an inherent feature of either economic design or kingdom[18]. This rational logic governs the redistributive mechanisms which selectively target crucial groups within society in order to build ‘cross-cutting coalitions’, thus “linking different social constituencies to the ruling family”[19]. Regime strategy has also served to hijack modernisation processes to impose ‘neopatriarchy’, a veneer of progressive governance that disguises traditional loyalties and inhibits political liberalisation to preserve its own power[20].

As legitimacy becomes a more significant factor within social contracts, regimes seek to stifle non-state narratives, which threaten to establish competing social perspectives and alternative sources of authority: indeed research by Inglehart and Welzel suggests a causal link between tolerant post-industrial society and the rise of ‘self-expression values’, promoting individual expression and political liberties inimical to authoritarian government[21]. Whilst regimes have attempted to foster legitimacy through manipulating religious and cultural identities[22], independent civil society has remained on the fringes of state endorsement[23]. This marginalisation is explained by Brumberg’s ‘trap of liberalized autocracy’, which constricts a “political system whose institutions, rules, and logic defy any linear model of democratisation”[24]. Gulf governments seek to co-opt and replace independent organisations with state-run entities: Kamrava illustrates in Qatar that regime penetration ““has directly undermined the potential emergence of an autonomous, politically independent Qatari civil society”[25]. Where civic space cannot be co-opted, governments stifle it with aggressive compressions that run counter to their modernising economic aspirations[26].

The significance of socialising media as a process is that it widens civil space in a domain extending beyond the limits of conventional state control. As commonly accessible resources, social media ‘level the playing field’, not only dispersing greater information but increasing the interactive element of current affairs, thus encouraging users to adopt personalised stances and question received wisdom[27]. In the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, Tufekci and Wilson found that ‘citizen journalists’ overwhelmed authorities with their “high levels of production and dissemination of multimedia content”[28]. Yet Lim argues the long-term process over the preceding decade that expanded social networks, established cross-class relations, and formed a “tangible narrative that resonated with everyday experience” was crucial to empowering the Egyptian opposition movement[29]. The distinction between short-term eruptions of online protest and long-term reformist movements helps explain the inefficacy of social media in isolated incidents and re-affirms the significance of more strategic applications. It has been suggested that the Internet is a ‘rusty bullet’[30], not a reliable mechanism for singularly liberalising political systems: research demonstrates that under certain circumstances social media can polarise political views[31] and risks being manipulated for government propaganda[32]. We must therefore understand these resources within a multifactor framework: the political impact of social media is determined by temporal and environmental variables – components of the holistic social structure. The endogenous features of resource depth, history and application, and the exogenous features of political undercurrents, comprise the determinants of social media’s influence on the political system.

## Encouraging Reform

Shirky explains the significance of social media as “long term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere”[33]. The emergence of civil society, following Fukuyama’s model of political evolution, mobilises subjugated

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groups, developing 'social capital' and eroding dysfunctional equilibria of elite control over society[34]. Two pivotal determinants of the political impact of social media are the solidarity within any given movement and the role of the state in relation to the broader social process. In order to facilitate liberal political reform, the state must not only cooperate with such evolution but also remain institutionally strong enough to adapt[35]. Political decay could only be avoided through innovation, as Huntington eruditely expounded:

"The primary problem of politics is the lag in the development of political institutions behind social and economic change." [36]

The political environments of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia encompass quintessential Gulf pathologies, from regime gridlock to sectarian divides. Despite a shared border, they represent each end of the regional spectrum: from small entrepot to lumbering heavyweight. The ruling bargains of both countries are under strain as conflicting pressures emanate from various factions of society – some to liberalise but some to consolidate elite control. There have been indications of state-sanctioned liberal reform, none clearer than Bahrain's 2001 National Action Charter, which declared:

"It is deemed proper that Bahrain should join democratic constitutional monarchies with a view to meeting peoples aspirations to further progress." [37]

Yet Peterson argues that, in the following years, substantial political reform was stymied and "the dialogue for change had reached an impasse" [38]. Saudi Arabia, founded upon "an agglomeration of competing narratives and socio-cultural diversity within the Kingdom" [39], has similarly demonstrated the "resilience of opaque networks of familial political-economic alliances" [40]. A snapshot of the mid-2000s would illustrate a dysfunctional equilibrium in which superficial concessions had patched up the dominant political class. Emir Hamad of Bahrain became King Hamad, enabling parliamentary elections but only to an enfeebled legislature that remained subordinate to the totalitarian executive [41]. Meanwhile in Saudi Arabia, despite municipal elections in 2005 and judicial reform two years later, changes were "insufficiently embedded within institutional structures" to justify being termed evolution [42].

Beyond the stagnations of government policy, social media have, by providing new platforms for expression, saturated society with new collective engagements: 60.5% and 90% of Bahrainis and Saudis respectively use the Internet [43], with 39% of Saudi users active on Facebook and 31% active on Twitter [44]. Bahrain's rich civic tradition naturally evolved onto the Internet, with the digital sphere connecting large portions of the population [45]; by 2010, Stephens argues that social media had become an integral component within Bahrain's national infrastructure [46]. Castells believes that the Internet creates a 'network society' that deepens civic engagement and promotes 'mass self-communication', converging with conventional media to weaken political legitimacy [47]. Indeed, research suggests that Internet bloggers helped thicken Bahrain's civil society in the years leading up to the 2011 uprisings by commenting on elections, criticising politicians and pressuring the government to become more accountable [48]. The value of these networks is the interaction they facilitate, as Shirky notes: "access to information is far less important, politically, than access to conversation" [49].

Despite their authoritarian governments, both countries have a history of civic participation in politics. Bahrain's tradition of openness to trade and migration has constructed a cosmopolitan society [50] which has a strong legacy of protest and petition, most notably the 'Bahraini intifada' in the 1990s [51]. The Saudi government similarly faced a series of petitions after the 1991 Gulf War, which "represented an influential mobilisation of elite groupings in favour of a formalised, accountable and rules-based system of governance" [52]. Though politics in Saudi Arabia is less popularised than in Bahrain, there remains a fundamental responsiveness within the regime that seeks to alleviate challenges to its legitimacy: in 2003, when a coalition of middle class citizens presented their political manifesto articulating a broad range of religious and economic frustrations, Abdullah engaged in a national dialogue about the need for reform [53].

The leaderships have a significant bearing on long-term reform movements. Whilst ruling bargains partly reflect popular opinion, substantial change has always been managed by the regimes. Ehteshami, in explaining the

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developments of the 1990s, posits a framework of 'reform from above' which is controlled by the political elite[54] – indeed Peterson describes Bahraini policies as 'gifts' from the ruler[55]. Nevertheless, popular pressure creates the initial incentive for change, demanding regime concessions to maintain stability.

Social media might create the popular engagement necessary to invert political manipulation back onto the regimes. Traditionally, any political reform has responded to the middle classes, from the Saudi coalition of petitioners to the Bahraini business interests that influence its economic policy. Bahrain's commercial class has little interest in policies that disrupt its neoliberal environment[56] or threaten the type of political deadlock that constricts Kuwait's parliament. Shirky suggests social media present entrenched elites with a 'conservative dilemma', whereby the reduced cost of coordination across society develops collective awareness, thus illuminating disparities between elite intentions and popular demands[57]. In Tunisia's 2010 uprising, digital platforms created 'master narratives' which enabled activists to "bridge geographical and class divides...activating a hybrid network made of the connective structures to facilitate collective action"[58]. One of the greatest difficulties facing liberal movements in Bahrain is the continued strength of the Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa Al-Khalifa, widely supported for engineering the post-oil economy but also conservative in outlook, synonymous with the heavy hand of the state[59]. The Crown Prince, Sheikh Salman Al-Khalifa, who runs the Economic Development Board and is associated future initiative such as Bahrain's 'Vision 2030', has established his own progressively more reformist cohort within the ruling family, reportedly running the EDB as a parallel government cabinet[60]. Though he was ostracised for engaging with protest demands during 2011 and disavowed by traditional ranks within the business community who feel threatened by his labour reforms[61], social media offers a mechanism to demonstrate support for the Crown Prince. Organised social movements can exploit the growing emphasis on popular legitimacy and responsive leadership within the ruling bargains, encouraging factional divisions within regimes and endorsing reformist policies. In this regard, digital networks can contribute to the state-society dialogue and indirectly influence policy although it still comes from above.

The policy frontier in Saudi Arabia presents a fragmented environment that is exposed to exploitation by collective action. The ruling family, as a burgeoning gerontocracy, has itself splintered into numerous factions – such as the 'Sudairi Seven' – that emerge from the vertical lines of authority and horizontal lines of competition[62]. Hertog's model of 'segmented clientelism' explains how policies are forged between coalitions according to self-interest and corruption[63]. Since 2011, this framework has been penetrated from within and its machinations leaked to the public via the Twitter account @mujtahidd, a mole dubbed the 'Saudi Julian Assange'[64]. Not only has this served to focus public attention on the malpractices but, with the highest twitter penetration in the world[65], Saudi society might be engaged to partake more actively in the policy process. The eruption of digital interaction has been mirrored by a revitalisation of Saudi's conventional media, as 15 national dailies now engage with substantial social debate[66]: this forms the deeper infrastructure necessary for social media to contribute to positive political change rather than decay.

By articulating opinions and forming digital collectives across issues, emerging civil society can convey its demands to the ruling class. As corruption becomes a greater issue, the need for legitimacy is heightened: coalitions that seek to extend their support base beyond the perimeters of the royal palace can integrate the pressure of social networks into their policy approach. A YouTube video of sexual abuse towards a child enraged the Saudi public in 2014, galvanising Twitter and precipitating a series of educational videos for children[67]. In mobilising society around a profound cultural anathema, the movement inadvertently drew attention to the political dimension of legislative responsibility and enriched civil space by engaging public opinion. In 2013, the Arabic hashtag which translates to #salaryisnotenoughforanything demonstrated the power of digital space to mobilise social frustration into political pressure, gaining 1.5 million tweets within its first 24 hours, rising to 17 million over the following fortnight, as users demanded higher public sector wages from the King himself[68]. Notably, the movement has surmounted traditional cleavages of gender, sect and generation to address the political arrangement at the heart of the ruling bargain[69]. As the realm of virtual expression empowers previously weak individuals to denounce hardship and government inaction, and proffers strong coalitions of support for those policymakers who might tackle these demands, popular legitimacy becomes more central to political calculations. Indeed prominent members of the Saudi royal family, such as Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, have begun using Twitter and Facebook to call for reforms in the Kingdom[70]. Not only does this reflect a divisive manipulation of regime fractures, the campaigns have broken a deep social taboo

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against challenging the leadership[71], a development that will have immense reverberations in the ruling bargain.

Economic pressures may present a useful route to political liberalisation as politicians invite further demands that reinforce civil society and also facilitate unintended consequences of liberalisation. By highlighting public sector fragilities in Saudi Arabia, the issues of unemployment and an underdeveloped private sector drive a deeper reform programme that seeks to nationalise the economy[72], thus rebalancing a system dominated by business elites that have held disproportional political leverage as a 'national bourgeoisie'[73]. The King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) is a good example of such inter-causal change: although originally designed to update the Kingdom's higher education environment and research levels, its mixed gender campus and liberal attitude towards women have transformed it into a flagship for "the reformulation of the social contract and mechanisms of state-society relations inherent in the gradual shift towards post-rentier structures of governance"[74].

A ruling bargain that becomes responsive to social media risks triggering political adjustments whilst updating the socioeconomic framework, evolving through the unintended consequences of 'political spandrels'[75]. The Perestroika movement within the USSR in the late 1980s offers such an insight: as the Law on Cooperatives liberalised business to improve efficiency within the Communist system, it unintentionally undermined the entire political order, empowering non-state actors. Bahrain's Special Investigation Unit, under mounting pressure permeating from cyberspace, found a policeman guilty of abuse following the submission of social media as evidence[76]. Whilst this does not immediately resolve the entrenched culture of torture and maltreatment that pervades its national security services, this responsiveness to social media confers a growing status upon them as platforms for legitimate political expression: this may indeed reflect a shifting perception within the leadership that popular support constitutes an ever more important cornerstone of the ruling bargain.

By enabling mass engagement with elite structures, digital media might have most impact on Saudi society by integrating the clerical establishment into a reformist dialogue. Wahhabi doctrine, enshrined in the Saudi state since Mohammed bin Saud and Mohammed Al-Wahhab formed an alliance in 1744, endows the regime with religious legitimacy[77]. The ulama also holds substantial political influence and presents the greatest obstacle to political reform in the Kingdom[78]. Social media, however, offers the opportunity to express grass-roots movements for political liberalisation within the country which is more palatable to the clerics than externally imposed Western democracy: indeed, so long as the upper tiers of the ulama-umara structure (the alliance between clerical establishment and state) are not challenged, moderate cultural pluralism is permissible within the Wahhabi doctrine[79]. The religious community has proved its willingness to engage the digital domain, as three of the five most popular Saudi Twitter accounts are run by clerics[80]. This may reconnect popular voice into the religious sphere by encouraging a transparent discourse between ulama and society.

More substantial political progress might be achieved if the state adopts a pragmatic style of leadership. With a more vocal popular base, the regime has stated greater emphasis on democratic legitimacy in recent years[81]: a future realignment away from ideological resources towards practical foundations would reflect the demands of an emerging civil society that might circumvent clerical dominance. The #women2drive movement indicates such a shift[82]. Whereas similar protests in the 1990s were met with a repressive clampdown, this ongoing campaign has yet to yield an arrest: moreover, social media have revealed public support for the activists, who have released popular videos on YouTube which have gone viral across Twitter[83]; the clerical establishment, on the other hand, has been exposed to criticism and ridicule following antediluvian arguments that contradict scientific evidence[84].

Social media do not simply update old mechanisms of government but can, where society has previously been dormant, create new political networks. By connecting and politicising disillusioned or previously passive sections of society, the digital space can invigorate new actors. Leading up to the Bahraini protests that began in 2011, there was disillusionment among youth and Shia demographics with entrenched issues of unemployment and discrimination[85]. Whereas in the 1990s these circumstances only mobilised certain areas within the country into protesting, Kinninmont contends that social media made the Bahraini population far more aware of the issues in 2011, consequently building the size of the demonstrations[86]. Indeed the number of tweets per day spiked to double the normal rate around the inception of activism on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2011[87]. Not only did these online alliances increase popular awareness but they created a collective consciousness, forming a decentralised and

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leaderless organisation that represented a new coalition of Islamists and secularists united by a common political cause[88]. In this regard, political identities and civic developments were demanding institutional accommodation or otherwise threatening political decay.

A similar scenario developed in Saudi Arabia over the past few years, as social media has provided alternative political routes where the state has denied formal infrastructure. A YouTube video in 2009 broadened social interaction as official narratives were debunked in the digital sphere: footage of abuse towards Shia citizens enraged tensions within Medina, not only indicating the lag of political development and the threat of decay, but also prompting Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr to publicise a controversial sermon on social media, using the platforms to proliferate moral resources for political ends[89]. However, as these protests widened the gap between state and society, by 2011 it became apparent that digital interaction required a wider framework to achieve political progress. The stiff suppression of protests led Matthiesen to observe:

“Apart from new media and a public sphere ripe for revolutionary symbols and narratives, a protest movement is facilitated by personal contacts and a history of political subversion.”[90]

## Transmutations: Protests, Polarisation & Repression

In assessing the impact of social media, it is useful to understand Morozov’s humbling critique of ‘cyber utopianism’: to assume that the digital sphere has inherent democratising forces “is akin to agreeing to box blindfolded”[91]. I apply this perspective to social media, arguing that digital platforms are context-dependent as their impact is determined by the broader social infrastructure – socio-cultural currents, government policies and conventional media among other factors. This equation expands the potential contribution of digital resources to encompass political outcomes from tightened authoritarianism to institutional decay: political liberalisation is a finely poised equilibrium located along this spectrum. Whilst the Arab Gulf has displayed authoritarian openings that might be exploited by social media, there are equally traits that mitigate this change.

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia share a history of sectarianism that has roots at the foundations of their political systems. The Sunni tribes that consolidated control became ideologically radicalised through the authoritarian pact that ingrained the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance into the social fabric of the region, stratifying sectarian divisions along socioeconomic lines[92]. Despite the cosmopolitan composition of Khaleeji culture across Bahrain’s archipelago and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia which boasted a strong Shia presence, British colonial policy strengthened the ruling Sunni families since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century[93]. Shia unrest fomented in civic action towards the end of the century, with large protests in Saudi Arabia in 1979 following “politics of uneven development”[94], and, despite a theological distinction between Bahraini Shia and Iranian Shia, the Al-Khalifa dynasty has long feared a ‘fifth column’ insurgency, communally discriminating against their Shia majority and fomenting the 1990s intifada[95].

Social media’s role within protest movements in the Arab Gulf has often become entangled and stymied by such sectarian conflict. Ulrichsen argues that the introduction of information and communication technologies into Saudi Arabia in 1999 facilitated the spread of jihadist propaganda, distorting the liberal civic network[96]. Research indicates that, despite cross-sect origins, the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain fell into divisive sectarianism, with social media expounding anti-Shia rhetoric[97]. The issue is fundamentally one of perspective: if the sectarian lens resonates more clearly with the public than the socioeconomic, then society will redraw the lines of conflict as Sunni vs Shia. Indeed Kinninmont argues:

“The minority of Sunni Bahrainis who helped to organise the initial protests in 2011 are now in danger of being written out of their history.”[98]

One important observation is that Twitter encourages partisan rhetoric, reinforcing ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ affiliations[99]; research suggests these divisions are perpetuated by the network of political retweets[100]. Karolak found that Facebook language for the Bahraini protests was radicalising and factionalist, inciting martyrdom, enmity and spreading false information, leading her to discern:

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“Users engage in a war of words. Moderate comments are usually ignored.”[101]

Other research suggests that the dominant Facebook page, ‘Coalition of February 14<sup>th</sup> Youth’, propounded polarised political views and promoted violence against security forces[102]. As the demonstrations in the Saudi Eastern Province stagnated and protesters became frustrated, activists are shown on digital media to confront the security forces with weapons and live ammunition[103]. Thus it can be understood that whilst developing solidarity, social media can simultaneously foster enmity towards external factions.

More threatening, however, to the successful emergence of a liberal political discourse, are regime efforts to manipulate the dialogue into a sectarian framework. Matthiesen argues that Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have engineered a ‘Shia threat narrative’ to mobilise sectarianism in order to suppress calls for reform in the broader social theatre to counter solidarity efforts online[104]. The sectarian discourse was already embedded within these monarchies, as the Bandar report, released in 2006, reveals extensive activities within the Al-Khalifa regime to foment anti-Shia sentiment, from manipulating elections to sponsoring media defamation[105]. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry found that the government had disrupted the 2011 uprising by demonising the Shia community, using inflammatory and derogatory language to incite historical fears of an Iranian ‘fifth column’[106]. Cross-sect solidarity is further undermined through incidences of brutal repression against Sunnis who protested alongside Shia[107]. Collective punishment has further destabilised cross-sect unity as over 30 Shia mosques have been destroyed since April 2011[108], striking at the core of religious identity.

The sectarian tension in Saudi Arabia reflects the regime’s rivalry with Iran, which has permeated vast aspects of Saudi society, including discrimination in schools[109]. The reconciliation offered by the 2003 National Dialogue sought elite relations between senior Shia figures and regime mediators, thus excluding disaffected youth from direct political process which social media has since provided, and engendering dissatisfaction within the Eastern Province[110]. Reformist dialogue across the digital sphere was not supported by the broader media infrastructure, which undermined sympathy for the Shia plights by initially ignoring the demonstrations and subsequently, as protests escalated in size and violence, portrayed them as an Iranian insurgency, forcing Shia leaders to ‘apologise’ for the traitorous youth who were fomenting unrest[111].

Accompanying the brutal regime crackdowns of physical protests, regime repression has moved into cyberspace as the authoritarian approach towards social media evolved from remedial – limiting its influence by disrupting the broader social infrastructure – to preventative – interfering directly in the digital sphere. Twitter activists in Saudi Arabia are frequently punished for raising political issues online, with two prominent human rights lawyers sentenced to a combined 21 years in prison for their online criticism of the country’s archaic system, although this did not stop them tweeting updates of the trial[112]. This defines a growing trend of quasi-legal suppression precipitating severe sentences for a broadening range of digital expression, from liberal websites advocating political reform to tweets critical of Saudi state religion[113]: this reflects the regime’s growing fear of any dialogue questioning their authority. The independent rhetoric of the 2011 protests in the Eastern Province led Saudi government to close political space, buying political acquiescence with \$100 billion in financial hand-outs and arresting members of an emerging political party[114], therefore denying broader institutional change to accompany social development. The Kingdom’s security forces violently detained Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr[115], who had incited political liberation in YouTube sermons. Hoping to marginalise the long term effects of digital interaction, the legal environment has become more hostile towards social media, as the Kingdom progressively updates its ‘cybercrime’ law[116] and demands regulatory oversight of encrypted VoIP software, such as Skype, banning those that do not comply[117].

Ministers in Bahrain have voiced similar intentions towards restricting VoIP[118], and an unconstitutional special session of the National Assembly was convened to propose tightening legal measures over social media[119]. By undermining any cooperative efforts between the protesters and the government, such as the Al-Wefaq’s negotiations with the Crown Prince in early 2011[120], activists were marginalised and less focussed on cooperation. In attempting to weaken civil society and deter popular engagement, the state has subsequently imprisoned scores of online dissenters[121], tortured bloggers[122], and detained senior opposition figures such as Nabeel Rajab and Said Al-Muhafda[123]. Research suggests that the Al-Khalifa regime has pursued more insidious methods, manipulating social media users through such techniques as trolling, naming and shaming and intelligence

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gathering[124]. A notorious method to erode the perceived protection of virtual interfaces has been to unveil 'anonymous' users through operating fake accounts[125]. Organisations such as the Social Media Club Bahrain[126] and Bahrain Internet Society[127] seem contrived to co-opt independent digital sources into the regime. These approaches imply that the government has encroached on the digital realm and rearranged the surrounding civic infrastructure to undermine the efficacy of social media in mobilising civil society.

Nevertheless, the influence of these Leviathans is far from decisive: social media remains untamed in many areas of society. Saudi Arabia did not seem to be able to enforce the ban on Viber, and other VoIP services remain active in the Kingdom[128], which suggests that anonymous interaction continues unabated. The Bahraini crackdown has been unable to stifle civic emancipation, and it has been argued that social media increased the liberalisation of women, as female activists such as Maryam Al-Khawaja have improved women's image and demonstrated that they have a role to play in any democratic transition[129]; similarly the blogosphere has been cited as facilitating the rise of Saudi feminism[130]. Research suggests that whilst online activism can enhance political polarisation, this plateaus over time, and bloggers actively engage with opinions from across the political spectrum[131], suggesting that sectarian cooperation might actually be enhanced – rather than diminished – through social media. Matthiesen argues that social media helps spread a transnational language of protest, helping to form civic identities based on political view rather than sect[132]. Indeed, the protest movement in Saudi Arabia is coordinated in the digital sphere through the 'Eastern Province Revolution' Twitter and Facebook pages which, as moderate coalitions, seek broad cross-sect aims, espousing political representation and non-sectarian values; moreover they do not believe in leadership but rather see community figures such as Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr as 'advisors', strengthening the movement by committing only to the broad banner of reform rather than personalised politics[133]. YouTube videos of female Sunni protesters decrying the incarceration of dissidents in the Sunni heartland of Saudi Arabia suggest that political frustrations will trump sectarian narratives, contributing to greater pressures for reform[134].

## Conclusion

The impact of social media on the political systems of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain will be determined by the broader social infrastructure and corresponding institutional framework. The regimes exhibit pathologies of dysfunctional ruling bargains – severe lack of economic opportunity, political representation and basic freedoms of expression and from discrimination[135] – which will either necessitate reform or precipitate political decay. Within this dynamic, digital platforms have enabled a thickening of Gulf civil society, with information flows and enhanced social interaction extending and empowering popular voice: the socialisation of media has politicised society. The diffusion of opinion and the emerging solidarity between various sections of society on fundamental political terms – such as opposing corruption and supporting liberal reform – appears to outpace the brutal, though comparatively limited crackdown. As a collective consciousness develops in cyberspace, traditional government strategies of targeting 'pivotal' constituents with redistributed hand-outs will have less effect in legitimising the regimes. The expansion of virtual space grows disproportionately to the narrowing of physical space: whilst this threatens the authoritarian regimes, it also destabilises social order – as without accommodating institutional development to match, advancing social mobilisation will lead to political decay. As Fukuyama argues, "sometimes violence is the only way to displace entrenched stakeholders who are preventing institutional change"[136].

If rulers wish to 'reform from above', they will need to accept the increasing importance of popular legitimacy, and strategic monarchies may choose to adopt a more pragmatic approach towards reform. Disentangling political institutions from traditional networks of power – such as Wahhabi machinations or Sheikh Khalifa Al-Khalifa's cabal – might be facilitated by the growing acceptance that social media reflects civic demands. On the other hand, the social media realm might be marginalised within policy circles – yet it seems unlikely that the behemoth can be neutralised. Matthiesen believes:

"The youth activism, the mobilising force of the Internet and smartphones, and the experience of the Arab Spring as the defining moment of a whole generation of young Arabs means that change has to come, be it through reform or, eventually, revolutionary outburst." [137]

Civic progress is precipitating irreversible social development in the Arab Gulf, as heightened expectations and new



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actors rise to the fore: the political institutions can either liberalise to accommodate these advances or fracture under the strain of discontent.

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