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**The Challenges of 2020 and the Future of
Political Reforms in the GCC
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Introduction

The GCC countries witnessed several transforming developments along 2020 that have also affected the rest of the region and the world. Two popular and long-serving Gulf leaders passed away this year, the [Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said](#) in January and the Emir of Kuwait Sabah Al- Ahmad Al-Sabah [in September](#). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic emerged in China in December 2019 and spread all over the region and the world in early 2020. [The pandemic severely hit the Gulf States causing a drop in oil prices due to the decrease in demand both globally and regionally](#). Additionally, two Gulf countries (UAE and Bahrain) made a historic decision and normalised relations with their long-time regional foe Israel.

The unexpected developments in 2020, particularly the global pandemic, have negatively affected socio-economic conditions causing uncertainty in the region. More specifically, [health and education systems, the labour market and social protection structures have become strained and overwhelmed across Gulf countries](#). Nevertheless, the incidents of year 2020 may actually lead to new opportunities for many Gulf governments to either initiate or accelerate reforms and new political openings to underscore the long-term challenges as it had happened in the 1990s and 2000s. Although liberal democracy has not consolidated in any of the Gulf countries, [historical experience shows that notable crises or security challenges in the region have](#)

[most commonly been followed by a period of political reforms and social changes](#).

An Overview of Political Reforms in the GCC

Looking at the Gulf region in retrospect, a pattern become noticeable. In the aftermath of the two Gulf Wars and the increasing security threats, the GCC countries initiated a series of political and economic reforms. In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, the accession of new rulers in [Bahrain, the UAE and Qatar](#) drove an impetus for change, particularly in the realm of constitutional reform and elected bodies. A new wave of transition has started to dominate the GCC countries.

The 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks had significant impact on the region. The US invasion of Iraq and involvement in the region accelerated the political reform and transition processes in the Gulf. These included [important transformations in governance, education, economy, technology and development of women in society](#).

When the Arab Spring began in Tunisia on 17 December 2010, new hopes for political transition and more reforms in the Gulf re-emerged. In the early years of the Arab Spring, [more reform for better governance and limited political and economic reforms were injected into the agendas](#) of the GCC regimes. Nevertheless, this time the majority of the Gulf regimes became more sceptical to political openings and reforms. Within a couple of years after the Arab Uprisings, a number of the

GCC regimes, [particularly Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain, became more repressive and experienced a decline in rule of law](#). The broad reform agenda indicated in their national visions set promising goals, but its implementation remained poor, wasteful, and often directed towards grandiose ends and projects of uncertain practical benefit.

The year of 2020 and Prospects for Political Reforms

[The year 2020 brought about a new normal](#) in which [the crisis unleashed by the outbreak of COVID-19 is hurting economies and societies, regardless of income level](#). The GCC States have not remained exceptional. The challenges brought about by the Covid-19 is again pushing Gulf regimes to ignite new political agendas involving reforms to respond to the people's needs and consolidate loyalty to rulers or regimes.

Since the start of the pandemic, the GCC States' response to Covid-19 has been firm and decisive. It has been praised around the region and their measures to curb the coronavirus have resulted in one of [the lowest death rates in the world](#). Many Gulf States focused on testing and medical treatment for all, financial support for citizens and campaigns to increase awareness of the virus and its consequences. Despite their success in keeping numbers low, the pandemic exacerbates potential long-term challenges such [as economic recessions, social and regional inequality, inadequate healthcare system, and political instability \(if regimes are perceived as unable to respond to social concerns\)](#). More critically, the recent slump in energy prices has eroded oil revenues and caused a liquidity crisis. This new

economic situation has potential to create many setbacks for the Gulf governments to sustain their social contract based on '[No Representation without Taxation](#)' and generous state spending in return for political backing. The new situation emphasizes the urgent need for a set of political reforms to [bestow an alternative for existing rentier social contract](#) in which the GCC regimes are responsible for redistribution of oil and state wealth for their public.

Another important change and challenge in the region are for the new Kuwaiti and Omani rulers to consolidate their power at home and abroad. This becomes even more of an important issue when considering the popularity of Sultan Qaboos and Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah both domestically and regionally. The two Gulf successors need to perform extra efforts to convince their people that they are capable of ruling the country. Thus, it will not be surprising to see more political openings and socio-political reforms in Kuwait and Oman in the near future to maximize the new rulers' popularity and minimize the new challenges fuelled by the coronavirus pandemic. In this regard, the first sign came from Oman where [in his first speech as the ruler, Sultan Haitham pledged to follow the non-interference policy and promises both to maintain continuity and to bring about reform](#).

Finally, the new foreign policy actions taken by UAE and Bahrain should also be underlined as potential challenges for these states and their regimes. While this normalization has been perceived by some analysts as an opportunity to advance the foreign policy objectives of the UAE and Bahrain, the latest deal with Israel has angered a large number of citizens

across the Arab world. and the Gulf. As shown in the most recent Arab opinion survey of 2019-2020, [an overwhelming majority \(88%\) of Arabs disapprove the recognition of Israel by their home countries, with only 6% accepting formal diplomatic relations. Refusal to recognise Israel is proportionally the highest in the Gulf region; nearly 90% of Qatar and Kuwait respondents reject their country's recognition of Israel, and 65% of Saudis expressed their rejection, as contrasted with 6% who agreed to the recognition, while 29% refused to express their opinion.](#) While the poll was not conducted in neither the UAE nor Bahrain, it demonstrates an idea that the decisions taken by these two states have not been welcomed by ordinary citizens across the Arab world and the Gulf. For this reason, it is possible to witness the regimes in UAE and Bahrain take new actions to fix their images among Arabs by granting new social/political rights domestically and economic means regionally. Moreover, a possible Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Israel will even further aggravate the dissent in the Gulf public.

Conclusion

Although it is often top-down and cosmetic in the Gulf region, initiating democratic reforms and giving political rights have shown a remarkable ability to increase the popularity of the Gulf rulers both domestically and internationally. Therefore, during times of crises these rulers and regimes have typically responded with reforms to keep their stronghold, legitimacy and popularity. In that regard, in the post-Covid-19 period, which will most likely witness some sort of a deepened crises, there is a high possibility that

democratic reform process will bounce back in the Gulf. One of the early signals arose from Qatar on 3 Nov 2020. Qatar's emir announced [Qatar would hold elections for its advisory Shura Council in October 2021. This is an important step towards strengthening Qatari advisory traditions and developing the legislative process with wider citizen participation.](#)

Whether these reforms will lead to the realization of democratic processes or they will be yet another top-down cosmetic process to consolidate, prolong and hinge onto to power will be determined by the politico-social interaction across the Gulf States.

About the author

Cihat Battaloglu is a political researcher, and the author of the book titled "Political Reforms in Qatar: from Authoritarianism to the Political Grey Zone". He also pursues his doctoral degree at Middle East Technical University, Department of International Relations. He previously studied and worked at Qatar University- Gulf Studies Program. His work centers on the Gulf Politics, particularly political transition in the region.

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