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The Problematic of Peaceful Power Alternation in the Arab World: The Gulf Cooperation Council States Between Specificity and International Standards

إشكالية التداول السلمي للسلطة في العالم العربي: دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي بين الخصوصية والمعايير الدولية

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Abstract:

Peaceful transfer of power constitutes one of the most prominent criteria of good governance in the contemporary international legal system. Its significance extends beyond the mere absence of violence during transition to encompass procedural and institutional requirements linked to free electoral competition and the will of the people. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states present a complex model, combining historically non-violent successions with monarchical governance structures rooted in family authority, tribal custom, and religious legitimacy. This study evaluates this model against internationally recognized standards using descriptive-analytical and comparative methods. It finds that these states reflect a partially grounded political and cultural specificity that does not, according to the international legal framework examined, exempt them from relevant treaty obligations. It further finds that GCC economic development visions correlate more strongly with the renewal of traditional legitimacy than with measurable indicators of democratic transition.

Keywords : Peaceful transfer of power – Gulf Cooperation Council states – Political legitimacy.

الملخص:

يُشكّل التداول السلمي للسلطة أحد أبرز معايير الحوكمة الرشيدة في منظومة القانون الدولي المعاصر، إذ لا تقتصر دلالته على غياب العنف في عملية الانتقال، بل تمتد لتشمل اشتراطات إجرائية ومؤسسية مرتبطة بالتنافس الانتخابي الحر وإرادة الشعب. وتطرح دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي في هذا السياق نموذجًا بالغ التعقيد، إذ تجمع بين انتقال سلمي خالٍ من العنف من الناحية التاريخية، وبنية حكم ملكية وأميرية تقوم على الأسرة الحاكمة والعرف القبلي والمرجعية الدينية. وتسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم هذا النموذج في ضوء المعايير الدولية المعتمدة، مستعينةً بالمنهجين الوصفي التحليلي والمقارن، وتخلص إلى أن هذه الدول تمثّل خصوصيةً سياسيةً وثقافيةً جزئية الأساس، لا ترقى — وفق الإطار القانوني الدولي المُستعرَض — إلى مستوى يُبيح التحلل من الالتزامات التعاهدية ذات الصلة، كما تنتهي إلى أن رؤى التنمية الاقتصادية الخليجية ترتبط بإعادة إنتاج الشرعية التقليدية أكثر من ارتباطها بمؤشرات قابلة للقياس للتحول الديمقراطي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التداول السلمي للسلطة – دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي – الشرعية السياسية .

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Introduction:

Since the early 1990s, the international order has witnessed an accelerating wave of democratization that swept across vast geographical regions — from eastern europe to latin america and sub-saharan africa — fundamentally redrawing the global map of governance systems, yet the arabian gulf region constituted a striking exception to this trend: the six member states of the gulf cooperation council (gcc) maintained their monarchical and emirate character, reproducing their political systems at a remove from the democratic transition trajectories experienced elsewhere in the world, even when the winds of the "arab spring" swept through the region between 2010 and 2012, these regimes succeeded in weathering the wave of protests and consolidating their continuity — a reality that raises fundamental questions about the nature of the legitimacy upon which they rest and the mechanisms by which that legitimacy is sustained.

Perhaps the most contentious issue in this context is that of the peaceful transfer of power — a concept that has come to constitute one of the foremost criteria of good governance within international human rights law and contemporary democratic theory, whereas these standards require that power transitions be institutional, transparent, and subject to the popular will through free and fair periodic elections, the arabian gulf states follow a markedly different trajectory: power transitions therein are governed by customary and dynastic mechanisms centered on the institution of crown succession and the deliberations of ruling family councils, entirely removed from genuine electoral competition, this distinctiveness has been manifestly illustrated in several landmark episodes, most notably the abdication of emir hamad bin khalifa al thani in qatar in 2013, the appointment of prince mohammed bin salman as crown prince of saudi arabia in 2017 under exceptional circumstances, and the contentious question of succession to sultan qaboos in the sultanate of oman in 2020 — an episode that exposed the fragility of the constitutional frameworks governing such matters.

Despite the considerable significance of this issue, the political science and legal literature continues to suffer from a conspicuous research gap, manifest in the scarcity of studies that systematically and evenhandedly connect the particularities of the gulf model of power transition, on the one hand, with the questions of convergence or conflict with internationally recognized standards in this domain, on the other, a great many existing studies have either confined themselves to descriptive accounts without critical assessment, or have taken partisan positions — either wholly justifying gulf exceptionalism or wholly condemning it — without any attempt to engage with the complexity inherent in this issue.

It is against this backdrop that the central research problem of this study crystallizes around the following fundamental question: Does the model of power transition in the GCC states embody a legitimate and sustainable political and cultural specificity, or does it fundamentally conflict with the requirements of peaceful power transfer as defined by international standards?

To address this problem, the study draws upon three complementary methodological approaches:

The descriptive method, which enables us to map the political reality of the GCC states and portray the mechanisms of power transition as they actually operate;

The analytical method, which allows for the deconstruction of these mechanisms, an understanding of their constitutional and traditional foundations, and a testing of their internal coherence;

The comparative method, which contributes to revealing points of similarity and difference both among the six member states of the Council and between them and other models of governance.

Accordingly, this study is organized around three principal axes:

The First Axis: The concept of peaceful power transfer — its theoretical framework and the international standards governing it.

The Second Axis: An analysis of the mechanisms of power transition in the GCC states and their assessment in light of those standards, culminating in an elucidation of the nature of the relationship between Gulf exceptionalism and international benchmarks: convergence or contradiction?

The third Axis:Comparative Assessment of the Gulf Model: Between International Standards and Constitutional Particularism

1. The Concept of Peaceful Power Transfer and Its International Standards

An inquiry into the problematic of peaceful power transfer in the Arabian Gulf states requires, as a preliminary step, a thorough engagement with the concepts and standards against which such transfer is assessed. Conceptual ambiguity inevitably gives rise to erroneous evaluations: the concept of peaceful transfer does not halt at the mere absence of violence in the transition process, but extends to encompass procedural and institutional conditions defined by the international human rights law framework and the established instruments of democratic governance measurement. The theoretical framing of these concepts thus constitutes an indispensable foundational step prior to any applied analysis of the Gulf model — for without it, any judgment rendered on that model remains suspended in a normative vacuum, serving neither the researcher nor the reader.

1.1- Conceptual Definitions

The analytical precision required in matters of power transition depends upon a rigorous distinction between the overlapping terms prevalent in this field. The concept of "transfer" is frequently used interchangeably with "transition" or "succession" without differentiation — a conflation that distorts understanding and impedes comparative analysis. This section therefore provides a precise conceptual framework that establishes the terminological foundation for the study as a whole.

A. Peaceful Transfer, Political Transition, and Succession — Nuanced Distinctions

Three closely interrelated concepts pervade the political science and legal literature, yet a careful distinction among them constitutes a methodological necessity rather than a mere intellectual luxury.

Peaceful Transfer of Power refers to the mechanism by which political authority passes from one party to another in accordance with pre-established institutional and legal procedures, without recourse to force or coercion. This concept embodies constitutional maturity — an expression of the political system's capacity to manage change within its own structure without destabilizing its foundations (Aljanabi, 2024, p. 377).

Political Transition, by contrast, is a broader and more encompassing term, denoting the shift from one system of governance to another — whether democratic or otherwise — most often accompanied by structural transformations in the constitution, institutions, and public policies (Tyson, 2024, p. 73).

Political Succession, as opposed to both of the above, denotes the transfer of authority within a single ruling family according to rules of lineage, hereditary right, or familial

appointment, entirely removed from any popular competition. It differs fundamentally from peaceful transfer in that it entrenches the monopolization of power rather than enabling its circulation (Herb, 1999, p. 234).

B. Institutional Alternation versus Customary Alternation

The distinction between institutional and customary alternation is not merely formal but extends to the very substance and consequences of each model. Institutional alternation rests upon explicit constitutional provisions that define the mechanisms, timelines, conditions, and competent authority for approving any transfer of power — rendering it predictable, subject to oversight, and open to judicial challenge in the event of a breach. Customary alternation, by contrast, is grounded in tribal and dynastic traditions and conventions, and tends in most cases to produce a pattern of authoritarian continuity rather than genuine rotation of power, with decision-making remaining confined to the ruling elite and entirely removed from popular participation (Gause, 1994, pp. 41–56).

1.2- International Standards for Peaceful Power Transfer

The problematic of peaceful power transfer is not debated in a normative vacuum, but rather within the framework of a comprehensive system of standards and indicators established by international organizations and democracy-measurement instruments. This section reviews the most prominent of these standards and their degree of legal and political bindingness — from United Nations instruments to quantitative measurement tools — thereby providing the referential framework against which the Gulf model will subsequently be assessed.

A. Standards of the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the African Union

The international human rights law framework enshrines a set of standards that render peaceful power transfer an international obligation rather than a mere policy option. In this regard, Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) stipulates that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government" (United Nations, 1948), and that this will "shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections." The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) reinforced this principle in its Article 25, binding State Parties to guarantee citizens the right to participate in public affairs and to elect their representatives periodically in free and fair elections (United Nations, 1966).

At the regional level, the African Union adopted the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance in 2007, which criminalizes the unconstitutional accession to or retention of power (African Union, 2007). Similarly, the Organization of American States entrenches the concept of democratic legitimacy as a condition for active membership in its Inter-American Democratic Charter of 2001 (OAS, 2001).

What emerges from these international instruments is that peaceful power transfer has become a binding standard at the global level, however uneven its application may be across different regions.

B. Democratic Governance Indicators: Polity IV and Freedom House

Democratic governance indicators constitute a methodological tool for measuring the quality of power transitions and classifying political systems. The Polity index differentiates among regimes along a scale ranging from (−10) for fully autocratic systems to (+10) for consolidated democracies, allocating a core portion of its score to assessing the regularity of

political competition for power and the existence of institutional constraints on executive authority (Center for Systemic Peace, 2020).

When these standards are applied to the Gulf states, their scores typically range between (−8) and (−10), classifying them among strictly autocratic regimes. Freedom House, for its part, categorizes GCC member states as either "Not Free" or "Partly Free" (Freedom House, 2023), citing the absence of genuine multi-party pluralism, the restriction of elections to the municipal level only, and the non-accountability of the highest executive authority to electoral processes.

C. Huntington's "Third Wave" Model and Its Limited Applicability in the Arab Context

Samuel Huntington, in his seminal work *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991), elaborated an analytical framework for democratic transitions experienced by more than thirty states between 1974 and 1990, defining peaceful electoral alternation as the cornerstone of any consolidated democratic system (Huntington, 1991, p. 56).

Yet this model has demonstrated considerable limitations when applied to the Arab context in general and the Gulf context in particular. The region witnessed only a partial and incomplete democratic wave — manifest in the experiences of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya — which was swiftly aborted or reversed. Scholars identify two principal factors that help account for these limitations: first, the rentier structure of Gulf economies, which enables ruling elites to distribute wealth as a partial substitute for political representation; and second, the comparatively limited development of an independent middle class detached from the state apparatus, a class that served as a primary driver of democratic transitions in other regions of the world (Clarke, 2025, p. 2; Gause, 1994, p 60).

1.3- Comparative Patterns of Power Transition

The distinctiveness of the Gulf model of power transition can only be fully understood through comparison with other models — ranging from well-established European constitutional monarchies to republican systems that have in practice resorted to dynastic succession. Comparison here is not an end in itself, but a revelatory instrument that highlights both commonalities and divergences in the Gulf states' trajectories, situating these experiences within a broader analytical context.

A. European Constitutional Monarchies: Spain and the Netherlands as Models

European constitutional monarchies represent the formally closest comparators to Gulf monarchical systems, yet they differ from them fundamentally in the nature of the exercise of power and the mechanisms of its transfer. In Spain, the Constitution of 1978 enshrines in its Article 1.3 that "the political form of the Spanish State is the Parliamentary Monarchy" (Constitution of Spain, 1978, Art. 1.3), wherein the monarch performs a symbolic and arbitral role while effective executive power is exercised by an elected government fully accountable to parliament.

The resilience of this model was demonstrated during the attempted coup of 1981, which was thwarted by the strength of the country's entrenched institutions (Preston, 2004, pp. 78–95). Along similar lines, the Netherlands has adopted a parliamentary monarchical model that reconciles dynastic continuity with institutional governance — as illustrated by the voluntary abdications of Queen Juliana in 1980 and Queen Beatrix in 2013 (Andeweg & Irwin, 2014, p 40), both of which responded to structural considerations consistent with an institutionalized

succession framework rather than conjunctural political pressures. This demonstrates that dynastic succession in these systems is managed within a rigorous institutional framework.

B. Authoritarian Republican Regimes and Dynastic Succession: Syria and Egypt

The experiences of Arab authoritarian republican regimes reveal a striking paradox: these systems were republican in their constitutional texts while practicing dynastic succession in substance, combining the drawbacks of both systems without the advantages of either. In Syria, power was transferred from Hafez al-Assad to his son Bashar in 2000 through a hasty constitutional amendment that lowered the minimum age of presidential candidacy from forty to thirty-four years — specifically to enable his succession (Perthes, 2004, p 149).

In Egypt, indications that Mubarak intended to transfer power to his son Gamal featured prominently in the political discourse preceding the fall of his regime in 2011 (Kassem, 2004, p 88). These cases are, according to several scholars, constitutionally more problematic than the Gulf model, because they strip republican formulations of their meaning and undermine the legitimacy claimed by the regime to a greater degree than an overtly monarchical system — which, from the outset, makes no formal claim to popular power alternation.

C. Gulf Monarchies: The Subject of the Present Study

The six GCC member states are governed by a monarchical and emirate pattern shaped more by dynastic tradition and tribal custom than by written constitutional provisions — even though most of these states have issued basic laws or governance statutes that partially address this matter. They differ considerably among themselves in their degree of institutionalization: while Saudi Arabia established the Allegiance Council (Hay'at al-Bay'a) in 2006 as a step toward codifying succession procedures (Saudipedia, 2006), the Sultanate of Oman lacked any explicit text designating an heir until 2020, when the opening of a sealed royal envelope revealed the designation of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq (Valeri, 2009, p 55).

This internal divergence among the six member states constitutes an analytically significant point, as it reveals that "Gulf exceptionalism" is not a monolithic bloc but rather a graduated spectrum between institutionalization and custom — thereby opening the possibility of examining prospects for gradual convergence toward standards of institutionalization more firmly grounded in international legitimacy, a point developed further through the systematic cross-case comparison in Section 2.3 below.

2. Mechanisms of Power Transition in the GCC States — Between Exceptionalism and International Standards

Having established in the first axis the theoretical and normative framework for the concept of peaceful power transfer, this axis examines the actual Gulf experience and poses the following questions: How is power effectively transferred in the GCC states? What foundations underpin this transition? Can these foundations be defensibly read as a legitimate specificity, or do they fundamentally conflict with international standards of power alternation? This axis addresses these questions through three interrelated dimensions: an analysis of the constitutional and traditional bases of these systems, a review of actual transition cases across the six member states, and a systematic comparative assessment that places the Gulf model in direct confrontation with international standards

2.1- Constitutional Foundations and Traditional Legitimacy of Power Transition in the Gulf

Any assessment of the mechanisms of power transition in the Gulf states must first engage with the constitutional and traditional structure upon which these systems rest. The

rules governing these mechanisms do not invariably derive from written texts; rather, they typically combine constitutional documents, dynastic custom, and religious authority in a configuration that renders it difficult to demarcate the legal from the political.

A. The Dynastic and Tribal Character of Governance Systems

The governance systems of the GCC member states rest upon a firmly entrenched dynastic pillar: specific ruling families exercise sustained control over political authority since the founding of these states — the Al Saud in the Kingdom, the Al Thani in Qatar, the Al Nahyan and Al Maktoum in the UAE, the Al Sabah in Kuwait, the Al Khalifa in Bahrain, and the ruling family in Oman prior to recent reforms. This structure has, according to several analysts, effectively rendered the state an extension of the ruling family rather than an independent entity over which members of society exercise alternating stewardship (Al-Rasheed, 2010, pp. 15–17).

Tribal bonds lend further consolidation to this structure, as the legitimacy of governance rests in part upon tribal loyalties that reinforce the ruling family's authority and constitute an informal network that reduces the likelihood of serious internal challenges to its position. This character is consistent with the traditional social organization of Gulf societies; several scholars nonetheless argue that it simultaneously constrains institutional power alternation, insofar as it concentrates authority as dynastic property rather than distributing it as a rotating public trust (Hashouf, 2022, p. 380).

B. The Role of Islamic Law in Framing Succession

The Gulf states ground their constitutional framing of power transition in Islamic Shari'a as a legitimizing framework for governance and modes of succession. Most Gulf governance statutes explicitly stipulate that the Holy Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah constitute the constitution of the state, and that the system of governance is founded upon the precepts of Islamic law (Shams el-din, 2016). Yet classical Islamic political jurisprudence has not enshrined a single, specific mechanism for the transfer of power, affording ruling families a wide margin of flexibility in interpreting this reference. In this context, several scholars argue that Shari'a functions in practice as a source of flexible legitimation rather than a rigid constitutional constraint that subjects the transition mechanism to accountability (Kechichian, 2008, p 46)

C. The Role of Ruling Family Councils in Determining Succession

Ruling family councils constitute the most influential operative mechanism for determining succession — even where written constitutional provisions exist. In most Gulf states, senior princes gather in informal consultations outside any formally announced legal framework to reach consensus on the next ruler, or to resolve disputes among competing factions within the family. Kuwait and Bahrain have witnessed several episodes that exposed the fragility of this mechanism when dynastic interests diverge and competing factions multiply. The continued reliance on these informal councils — even after the issuance of constitutional documents purporting to regulate succession — indicates that internal family dynamics can take precedence over written texts in actual practice (Herb, 1999, pp. 210–212).

2.2- Actual Cases of Power Transition in the Gulf States — An Analytical Study

Constitutional and traditional frameworks alone are insufficient for assessing the Gulf model of power transition; the actual cases in which this model has been tested on the ground must also be examined. The following cases provide rich analytical material, revealing the

gap or convergence between text and practice, and between declared constitutional frameworks and actual political dynamics.

A. Saudi Arabia: From the Allegiance Council to Direct Crown Succession

Saudi Arabia represents the most analytically complex and instructive case in matters of power transition. Since the founding of the Kingdom, succession has been governed by dynastic consensus based on the principle of seniority among the sons of the founder, King Abdulaziz Al Saud. This approach produced an escalating pattern of aging monarchs and declining capacity for effective governance, which prompted King Abdullah in 2006 to establish the Allegiance Council — composed of thirty-five princes from among the founder's sons and grandsons — with the aim of codifying the mechanism for selecting the Crown Prince within a quasi-institutional framework (Saudipedia, 2006).

Yet this framework did not withstand political necessity when King Salman appointed his son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as Crown Prince in 2017 — a move that bypassed the principle of seniority and displaced Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. This episode reopened the question of the Allegiance Council's effectiveness and its capacity to constrain the monarch's will, thereby exposing the limits of formal institutionalization when it confronts the imperatives of dynastic politics (Hertog, 2018, p 203).

B. Qatar: The Model of Voluntary Abdication (2013)

The abdication of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani in favor of his son, Emir Tamim, in June 2013, represents an exceptional case in the Gulf context — the first in the region's history in which a ruler voluntarily relinquished power while in full possession of his faculties in favor of his successor. The transition unfolded with a remarkable degree of calm and fluidity, devoid of any publicly visible internal tensions, earning it widespread classification among observers as a model of controlled peaceful transition (Kamrava, 2013, p 109).

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the context reveals that this abdication occurred under considerable regional pressure in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and may plausibly be read as a preemptive precaution to secure stability rather than the establishment of a culture of institutional alternation. The decision remained individual in nature, unregulated by any binding constitutional mechanism susceptible to systematic replication.

C. The Sultanate of Oman: The Succession Problematic and the Absence of a Direct Heir (2020)

The death of Sultan Qaboos bin Said in January 2020 exposed the most serious vulnerability in the Gulf system of power transition: the absence of any explicit designation of a successor. Qaboos governed for forty-five years without appointing a Crown Prince or producing a legitimate heir, leaving the Sultanate confronting a serious vacuum. The 1996 Basic Law had established an emergency mechanism stipulating that the ruling family would convene within three days to select a successor, and that, failing consensus, the Defense Council would open a sealed royal letter designating the name pre-selected by the Sultan himself (Valeri, 2009, pp. 55–60).

This mechanism succeeded in producing a smooth transition when Sultan Haitham bin Tariq was named successor; however, it revealed that "institutionalization" in this case amounted to nothing more than a sealed individual recommendation — not a genuine institutional system susceptible to systematic replication and public review.

D. Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE: Comparative Patterns

Among the remaining Council members, Kuwait follows a hybrid pattern combining the authority of the Emir with relative parliamentary oversight. The Kuwaiti political arena witnesses recurring confrontations between the National Assembly (Majlis al-Umma) and the government, affording Kuwait a comparatively wider margin of accountability than its neighbors — even though succession to the throne itself remains firmly outside any popular or parliamentary purview (Kinninmont, 2012, p 8).

Bahrain continues to live with the repercussions of the 2011 protests, which exposed the depth of the rupture between the ruling family and segments of the population — a rupture that has yet to be addressed through meaningful institutional reform (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The United Arab Emirates, for its part, maintains its complex federal model of consensual governance among the seven emirates, wherein the Al Nahyan family holds the presidency and the Al Maktoum family holds the emirship of Dubai — a structure that admits no degree of political competition originating outside these two dynasties (Fadli, 2014, p. 93; Davidson, 2005, pp. 120–122)

2.3-Assessing the Gulf Model Against International Standards

Constitutional and traditional frameworks alone are insufficient for passing judgment on the Gulf model of power transition; the actual cases in which this model has been put to the test on the ground must also be examined. The following cases provide rich analytical material, illuminating the gap or convergence between text and practice, and between declared constitutional frameworks and actual political dynamics.

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Yet this framework proved unable to withstand political necessity when King Salman appointed his son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as Crown Prince in 2017 — a move that bypassed the principle of seniority and displaced the incumbent Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Nayef. This episode reopened fundamental questions about the Allegiance Council's effectiveness and its capacity to constrain the monarch's will, laying bare the limits of formal institutionalization when it confronts the imperatives of dynastic politics. (alwasatnews, 2006)

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establishment of a durable culture of institutional alternation — for the decision remained individual in character, unregulated by any binding constitutional mechanism susceptible to systematic replication. (reuters, 2013)

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Bahrain, for its part, continues to live with the repercussions of the 2011 protests, which exposed the depth of the structural rupture between the ruling family and significant segments of the population — a rupture that has yet to be addressed through any meaningful institutional reform. The United Arab Emirates, meanwhile, maintains its complex federal model of consensual governance among the seven constituent emirates, wherein the Al Nahyan family monopolizes the presidency and the Al Maktoum family holds the emirship of Dubai — a structure that admits no degree of political competition originating outside these two dynasties, rendering the federation's executive architecture entirely insulated from popular contestation.

3. Comparative Assessment of the Gulf Model: Between International Standards and Constitutional Particularism

Having examined the constitutional foundations and actual practices of power transition in the GCC states, a purely descriptive approach is insufficient to assess the Gulf model. A meaningful evaluation requires a comparative framework capable of measuring the extent to which Gulf succession practices conform to internationally recognized standards of peaceful power transfer. This section therefore adopts a comparative and critical approach by examining the Gulf model against international legal standards, constitutional monarchies, and contemporary theories of democratic legitimacy.

3.1- The Gulf Model in Light of International Standards of Peaceful Transfer of Power

International human rights law recognizes peaceful transfer of power as one of the essential pillars of democratic governance. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) affirm that the authority of government derives from the will of the people, expressed through periodic, genuine, and competitive elections. (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948)

Measured against these standards, the GCC states present a fundamentally different model of political succession. Executive authority is transferred through hereditary succession within ruling families rather than through competitive electoral processes. Consequently, while Gulf monarchies generally succeed in ensuring peaceful continuity of government, they do not satisfy the international democratic criterion of political alternation based upon popular sovereignty. (Samuel Huntington,1991,p7)

Nevertheless, reducing the assessment exclusively to electoral standards may oversimplify the Gulf experience. Political legitimacy within the GCC has historically been derived from alternative sources, including dynastic continuity, religious legitimacy, tribal consensus, and the distributive capacity of rentier economies. These foundations have contributed significantly to political stability despite the absence of electoral succession.

Accordingly, the Gulf model demonstrates that peaceful transfer of power and democratic alternation are not necessarily identical concepts. A political system may achieve stable succession without fulfilling the procedural requirements associated with liberal democracy. However, from the perspective of international governance indicators, the exclusion of citizens from selecting the head of state remains a significant limitation (House, 2023,p23).

3.2- Comparing Gulf Monarchies with European Constitutional Monarchies

Although both the Gulf monarchies and European constitutional monarchies retain hereditary royal institutions, their constitutional structures differ fundamentally.

In constitutional monarchies such as Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, the monarch symbolizes state continuity while executive authority is exercised by elected governments accountable to parliament. Political alternation therefore occurs through competitive elections without affecting the hereditary institution of the Crown (Lijphart, 2012,p110).

By contrast, in the GCC states, succession involves not merely the transfer of the symbolic position of Head of State but also the transfer of executive authority itself within the ruling family. Consequently, succession remains confined to dynastic elites rather than constituting political alternation among competing political actors.

The principal distinction, therefore, is not hereditary succession itself but the constitutional location of political authority. Whereas European monarchies separate hereditary symbolism from democratic governance, Gulf monarchies continue to combine hereditary legitimacy with executive power, thereby limiting institutional mechanisms for political alternation (Lijphart, 2012,p112).

Conclusion:

This study has concluded that the question of peaceful power transfer in the Gulf Cooperation Council states constitutes a complex problematic that admits neither absolute condemnation nor unconditional exoneration. These states do possess a documented history of

power transitions largely devoid of armed violence; yet they simultaneously lack the procedural and institutional conditions that the international standards reviewed in Section 1.2 treat as constitutive of genuine peaceful alternation. The gap between the two models is not merely formal or procedural; at its core, it reflects a gap between two divergent conceptions of political legitimacy: a traditional legitimacy grounded in dynasty, heritage, and religion, and a contemporary legitimacy grounded in the popular will and electoral competition.

I. Findings

The concept of peaceful power transfer in the Gulf states lacks its two internationally recognized essential conditions: free electoral competition for the highest executive office, and the possibility of transferring power to actors outside the ruling family.

These states embody a hybrid model of transition mechanisms that combines constitutionally weak documents with customary dynastic practices that take precedence over them in actual operation — rendering the constitutional text a formal veneer rather than a genuine institutional constraint.

A notable degree of variation exists in the level of institutionalization among the six states: Kuwait occupies a comparatively advanced position by virtue of a genuinely functioning parliament, while the Sultanate of Oman remained, until 2020, the most fragile model given the complete absence of any publicly announced text designating a successor.

Economic modernization visions such as Saudi Vision 2030 have not produced any meaningful convergence with democratic alternation standards; on the contrary, they have been accompanied by political restriction rather than participatory openness, indicating that they function as instruments for renewing governance legitimacy rather than as pathways for political reform.

The argument of cultural and religious specificity advanced against international standards carries partial legitimacy at the descriptive level; however, it does not exempt these states from the obligations arising from the international covenants to which they are party — most notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The comparative analysis with European constitutional monarchies demonstrates that monarchical character alone does not constitute an obstacle to institutional alternation, and that the fundamental distinction lies in the existence of a genuine constitution that constrains the ruler's prerogatives and entrenches accountability — a feature conspicuously absent in the Gulf context.

II. Recommendations

Constitutional codification of succession mechanisms in explicit and binding terms that transcend existing ambiguous formulations — specifying the authority competent to select the successor, the criteria governing that selection, and the binding procedural timelines — so as to render this mechanism predictable and subject to accountability.

Expanding the role of legislative institutions and transforming them from consultative bodies into councils endowed with genuine legislative and oversight powers, thereby activating the principle of separation of powers, even within the limits afforded by the monarchical character of these systems.

Disclosure of crown prince selection procedures and the participation of public institutions therein, in lieu of their confinement to closed family consultations — as transparency reinforces domestic legitimacy and reduces the probability of tensions at each transition.

Substantive — rather than formal — engagement with United Nations review mechanisms, particularly the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), accompanied by a commitment to implementing its recommendations concerning political participation, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression as preparatory steps toward modernizing the governance framework.

Harnessing economic development visions as a bridge toward gradual political reform, by linking governance and transparency indicators and economic citizen empowerment to a parallel trajectory of participatory political empowerment — for development is not sustainable in the absence of genuine political participation.

Reforming law and political science curricula in Gulf universities to incorporate the concepts of participatory democracy and peaceful alternation as subjects of critical inquiry rather than prohibited topics — thereby producing academic and elite generations capable of contributing to the reform trajectory.

III. Prospects for Further Research

This study opens several research avenues worthy of deeper investigation. The geographical scope could be extended to encompass other Arab monarchies — such as Morocco and Jordan — in a broader comparative approach that tests whether partial constitutional monarchies are better positioned to escape the succession problematic relative to absolute monarchies.

The generational transition in Gulf leadership — embodied in the rise of Mohammed bin Salman and Tamim bin Hamad — equally merits independent scholarly attention to determine whether it represents a seed of transformation in governance culture or merely a reproduction of the same pattern in a more modernized guise. At a more encompassing level, the relationship between the rentier political economy and the prospects for democracy in the Arab context calls for in-depth investigation that transcends the classical thesis to encompass new variables — most notably the decline of oil revenues and the shifting class structure of Gulf societies.

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