

# The Political Culture in Qatar: Beyond the Rentier State

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**Abstract:** Discussions on the political culture of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are centralized around their rentier systems. However, this perspective prevents us from seeing the embedded traditional values and politics which these societies have been managing with under their rulers for decades. Traditional elements of political culture including majalis, diwan, tribal gatherings and national advisory councils have been enriched by social media over the last decade, especially the virtual majlis. Political culture in Qatar provides unique components beyond the oil-centered approach with regards to state-society relations and national identity, where elements of social and human capital are being added to these traditional and unconventional tools of political engagement.

### Introduction

Discussions on the political culture of the GCC states, which are comprised of the six oil monarchies of the Gulf, are centralized around their rentier systems - a type of distribution economy. However, this perspective prevents us from seeing the embedded traditional values and politics which these societies have been managing with under their rulers for decades. Majlis, diwan, tribal gatherings and national advisory councils (the majlis al-shura in Qatar) are all both formal and informal conventional tools which the Khalijis are engaging with on a political and societal level.

In addition to traditional elements of political culture, social media has become a dynamic part of society where people discuss local and global politics issues, especially in the last decade. Although the GCC states are the most cyber-connected societies of the Arab region, there are still concerns over a lack of online engagement on issues of public affairs because of the risk of state retribution for openly declaring political views. The youth is particularly active in such virtual majalis and they believe they can work towards social change in the Gulf societies. The political culture in Qatar thus provides unique components beyond the oil-centered approach, regarding state-society relations and national identity, when elements of social and human

capital are added to these traditional and unconventional tools of political engagement.

### Qatar's Political System

The conceptualization of political culture reflects long-lasting structures, norms and values of the society embedded within it. The prevalent definition of political culture by Almond and Verba (1963, p.12) refers to "a set of orientations toward a special set of social objects and processes." Political culture is a combination of inputs and outputs supported by these set of orientations. The emergence and historical evolution of political culture is closely related to the political system itself, though some countries with the same political systems could have diverse political cultures.

Qatar is a small Emirate located in the Arabian Gulf and gained its independence in 1971. Prior to recognition of its independent statehood, which refers to a modern governance model, its political system had evolved from a purely tribal model of governance by the Al-Thani tribe to a formal and more hierarchical one. Indeed, the Ottoman and British recognition and consolidation of Al-Thani authority in the territories of today's Qatar in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries facilitated the construction of a formal ruling family in the twentieth century.

In Article 1 of the Constitution of Qatar (2003) its political system is defined as democratic: “Qatar is an independent sovereign Arab State. Its religion is Islam and Shari’a law shall be a main source of its legislations. Its political system is democratic. The Arabic Language shall be its official language. The people of Qatar are a part of the Arab nation.” This is in contrast to the state’s self-declaration, in the CIA World Factbook, which states that Qatar’s political system is absolute monarchy. Incompatibility between the political discourse and political praxis is a general problem in the Arab world and considering the existing regime in Qatar, absolute monarchy fits with the state’s political practices better.

In the latter parts of the Constitution of Qatar (Article 8, 2003), the absolute monarchy is confirmed without mentioning it, instead stating that “the rule of the State is hereditary in the family of Al Thani and in the line of the male descendants of Hamad Bin Khalifa Bin Hamad Bin Abdullah Bin Jassim. The rule shall be inherited by the son named as Heir Apparent by the Emir.” Political culture in Qatar is therefore rooted in a political system, which has evolved from a tribal model to an absolute monarchy with hereditary accession.

### **One Political Culture for the Gulf?**

The six GCC states share similar social, economic and political dimensions. Their political systems also share values and rules. Do these commonalities provide a same for all political culture in the Gulf? Not exactly. Although they share a huge variety of cultural practices (for instance majlis in Qatar, Diwaniya in Kuwait), there are idiosyncratic cases for each GCC state’s political culture. However, is better to start an assessment of Qatar’s political culture with common characteristics of state-society relations in the GCC to enable us to better understand regional factors.

To start with, as Al-Zoby and Baskan (2014) also suggest, state and society are not completely separate entities in the Gulf, but rather “state is embedded more deeply in society in the Gulf and that society has more subtle ways to impact and shape the state”. Since the state structure evolved from tribal tradition, members of a tribe do not recognize a state structure with an authority system based on grades, but instead base their communities on a brotherhood behind a common leader. For the political regimes of the elected democracies, rulers are the political elite representing the state. In the Gulf, tribal attachment to the land encourages people to perceive the ruler and political elites as the leaders of their community, i.e. someone who is like them but rules for them.

The second dimension of the Gulf’s state-society relations is the existence of informal channels of political engagement and participation which may take the place of formal structures, particularly in countries where these structures are lacking. Today, social media as a virtual mechanism of dialogue is added to these traditional tools. Even the absolute monarchies of the GCC watch discussions on social media to sustain the political elites, with

people's declarations of their stances online (mostly with nicknames) making states aware of problems. Societal interactions in the form of the majlis and social media are collective actions and in traditional political culture literature, although the culture is a collective output, the political bargain is a professionally organized network based on individual manners.

Hence, political culture in the GCC has a collective manner bringing a social capital which facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam (1995, p.664–665) defines social capital as “features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.” This is exactly how traditional and current social media works in GCC society.

Lastly, based on the traditional values and the current economic system, state and society in the Gulf refers to mutual expectations from each other. Although both tribal values and Islam play a role in building such mutual expectations, new dimensions are added based on changes in world politics and economic systems. Political changes in the Arab countries after the Arab spring have demanded more democratic regimes and encouraged elected councils and municipal elections in the conservative regimes of the GCC. A more positive approach to the role of women in politics has also added to the political culture of the GCC countries. Although women face strong opposition in elections across the GCC by some parts of society, they are now visible. Despite Qataris still living under a monarchy, being exposed to different types of political cultures through social media, movies, news and their visits

abroad has re-shaped their expectations, not only for the youth but middle-aged citizens also.

### **Political Culture in Qatar**

Theoretical lenses represented earlier by Almond and Verba (1963) portray Qatar's political culture with the subject political culture. In this case, the society as a subject is aware of specialized governmental authority, acquiescing to elite decision-making as the Emir is considered the first leader among equal leaders. Assessment of subject political culture helps us understand the set of orientations shared by the Qatari society and state which enable it to maintain a stable political system. Deference and mutual expectations are two such examples embedded in Qatari political culture.

### **Deference: A perspective of social capital?**

Deference is a very typical set of orientation for the political culture of an absolute monarchy and it refers to an accepted level of obedience to the ruler. Can social capital help the GCC states go beyond a pure deference? This question is based on the idea that the added value of traditional or unconventional political engagement tools (majlis, social media, and Friday prayer) provide society room for political bargaining in Qatar. When societies have high levels of social capital through which trust and “horizontal ties of mutual involvement” abound, the political culture benefits from such an accumulation. Since Qatar is a monarchy, formal and institutional methods of political participation are clearly hierarchical and, thereby, vertical. However, with the help of social capital society can open channels for horizontal state-society relations when politically engaged via informal gatherings.

### **Mutual Expectations and Human Capital**

A second set of values in the Qatari political culture are the mutual expectations of the state and society. In the case of Qatar, the role of the state is to guarantee the welfare and security of citizens by providing economic security and welfare benefits. In turn, the role of citizens is to show positive acceptance of this centrally controlled political system. This is not the same as deference because this dimension is based on the state's ability to fulfill its roles by providing for its citizens. According to Inglehart (1988), there is a linear association between economic development, living standards and interpersonal trust among the masses in the European context. In other words, economic development profoundly impacts people's satisfaction levels with their living standards and intra-societal trust. Considering the mutual expectations of existing living standards in Qatar, there is a visible link between the citizens' (even residents in some cases) satisfaction and political culture.

Distribution of the state's opportunities to the citizens and investment in human capital are two duties of the Qatari state in relation to mutual expectations. Stability of the political system is based on the consistency of these mutual expectations. Distribution of the state's opportunities is conducted under the welfare state system which covers education, health and provides many other forms of social expenditure on its citizens. Investment in human capital is heavily emphasized by the Qatari state in the Qatar National Vision 2030. The four pillars of the national vision are human, social, economic, and environmental development, which emphasize the aim to develop society by investing heavily in building human capital to achieve lasting prosperity. The Qatari state focuses on education to create a physically and mentally healthy national labor force with a strong sense of a shared identity based on Arab culture and Islamic values as set out in the national vision. Sustaining state and society relations via political culture based on interpersonal trust and satisfaction, investing in human capital and meeting expectations to enhance conditions of its citizens by all means is a critical step for Qatar.

### **The Blockade: A Transformation?**

Diwan (2016) has proposed a rise of new nationalism or micro-nationalism characterized by the mobilization of the citizenry in support of both the state and its ruling monarchs in 2016. Whether the changes in the Gulf are defined as a new nationalism or not, the current Gulf crisis which erupted on June 5, 2017 has been highly influential on state-society relations and the political culture of Qatar. During the crisis, iconic images of the Emir of Qatar were displayed on every corner of Qatar's major cities, in huge banners and on platforms positioned at the entrances of homes and institutions. This has provided a space where citizens and expatriates could express their support for the state by inscribing personal messages. The Gulf crisis has thus underlined the centrality of *majaalis* within the political culture of Qatar as a representation of solidarity-oriented deference and support of the leader.

During the same crisis, a variety of hashtags on social media in support of the Emir enjoyed widespread popularity and were retweeted as a virtual form of majlis by Qatari citizens and expatriates alike in both Arabic and English. These included #iloveqatar, #qatarisnotalone, #istandwithqatar, #fiftydayssincetheseige, #QatarWins, #WeAreQatar, #TamimtheGlorious, #Tamimalmajd, to name but a few. While there have been no public demonstrations or protests as these are not part of the subject political culture of Qatar, these banners and posters displaying pictures of members of the royal family were present in almost every family majlis. The support on social media also served as a representation of public opinion and a show of mass solidarity.

Since the siege, the way in which Qatar's citizens view national identity and the Qatari political culture have undergone changes which could have lasting and long-term impacts on the nature of state-society relations in this Gulf monarchy. Findings of our current study, which includes interviews with the locals, suggest that there may be a rising form of new

nationalism taking root in Qatar. Sparked by the current Gulf crisis, this new nationalism is linked to Qatari political culture and its relationship to increased political participation in informal venues and multiple macro and micro-level streams of identity construction at both societal and state levels.

This new form of nationalism across the GCC, adds more identity politics to the domestic calculations, and has encouraged societies to re-identify themselves in their micro-nations, as the Emiratis, Saudis, Qataris, Kuwaitis. This new phenomena of micro-nationalism in the GCC is in complete contrast to the imagined Gulf society – the Khaliji. The GCC crisis has encouraged a national approach to the fragile Gulf politics, which indeed requires a regional approach to overcome the current political strain. Since Qatar is the victim state in this complex system of transforming political cultures and new nationalism, all these elements may encourage transformations within Qatari political culture which could have even stronger and longer lasting effects on its political system.

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