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From Oil to Stability: A Study of Rentier Economies and Social Movements in GCC Countries

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Abstract

This study employs a mixed-methods analytical approach, drawing on multi-source data to examine the mechanisms of political stability and the absence of demand-driven social movements within the governance structures of GCC countries. The theoretical framework integrates concepts from rentier state theory, oil-based economies, late-stage rentierism, and neo-patrimonial governance models. The findings indicate that the United Arab Emirates has successfully maintained political cohesion and managed social discontent by pursuing parallel strategies in both economic and political domains. Economically, policy initiatives have aimed to reduce dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and expand productive sectors to mitigate structural vulnerabilities. Politically, a quasi-responsive governance model has emerged-one that largely fulfills citizens' welfare demands while severely restricting democratic and political participation. Nevertheless, factors such as generational shifts, the rise of a politically marginalized middle class, demographic transformations, declining oil resources, and increased public awareness may catalyze future political change and democratic challenges in the region.

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Introduction

In recent decades, member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have faced mounting challenges across economic, social, and political spheres. These nations-predominantly built upon oil-based economies-are striving to transition away from hydrocarbon dependency toward more sustainable and diversified development trajectories. Reformist agendas articulated through various national visions reflect a governmental inclination to restructure economic frameworks, empower the private sector, and enhance citizen engagement in socio-economic domains. These visions, aimed at reducing oil dependency, diversifying the economy, and promoting transparency and accountability, represent a paradigm shift in public policy across the region.

While the primary focus of these programs remains economic development, certain social reforms have followed, leading to a relative expansion of civil liberties and increased rights for specific social groups. However, the trajectory of political reform in GCC countries remains hindered by entrenched structural and institutional barriers-including the concentration of power within monarchical institutions, restrictions on dissent and reformist actors, and the emergence of both domestic and external opposition. This context raises a fundamental question: Can economic and social reforms in GCC countries pave the way for democratic transition? How long will the current political stability in the Gulf sheikhdoms and broader GCC region persist? To what extent will oil revenues and the welfare technocracy associated with rentier-oil economies continue to exert influence, and will this inertia and conservatism eventually dissipate?

Adopting an analytical-descriptive approach, this article explores the impact of rentier economics and reformist agendas on political structures and social movements in GCC countries. It begins by discussing the concepts of democratic transition and rentierism, then examines economic crises-particularly the decline in oil prices in recent years (e.g., post-2014)-as key drivers of reform. The article subsequently addresses the imbalance between economic and political development, which remains a central obstacle to democratization. Ultimately, it seeks to analyze the interplay between economic reforms, social dynamics, and the feasibility of democratic transition in the GCC region.

Related Literature

Rivera-Batiz (2002), through a statistical analysis, concluded that democracy has positive effects on governance quality and economic growth. In his view, it is democracy that enhances governance, and only within democratic systems can non-development-oriented governments be replaced through democratic mechanisms. In authoritarian regimes, such a shift is not feasible, and non-developmental trajectories may persist for decades (Rivera-Batiz, 2002:2).
In another study, Baum and Lake (2003) found that democracy indirectly contributes to economic growth. They argued that in poorer countries, democracy even affects indicators such as life expectancy.

Adam Przeworski, in a comprehensive study of 135 countries spanning the period from 1950 to 1999, concluded that regime type has minimal impact on investment levels and capital development overall [1].

Jack Goldstone and Adriana Kokornik (2005) demonstrated that the relationship between democracy and development does not follow a single pattern. They categorized various countries based on the interplay between political democracy and economic development.

David Leftwich, a prominent theorist of the developmental state, after examining both successful and unsuccessful cases of economic development in democratic and non-democratic systems, concluded that it is not necessarily the "type of regime" but rather the quality and characteristics of the state and its policies that significantly influence economic performance. According to Leftwich, democratic institutions may, at least in the early stages of economic development, disrupt the planning process [2].

- An analysis of the impact of political systems on economic performance reveals three key insights:
- There is no universal model linking regime type to economic performance; countries with similar political systems often exhibit vastly different economic outcomes.
- No specific political system can be universally recommended as an effective blueprint for achieving economic development.

Historical evidence suggests that variables such as governance quality, government efficiency, and the ideological orientation of ruling elites-whether democratic or authoritarian-have had a greater impact on economic development than regime type alone.

Political Regime Type and Economic Development

A review of the political systems of Western developed countries reveals that the vast majority operate under democratic regimes. Conversely, many non-Western developmental states-at least during the initial phases of their development-have predominantly been governed by non-democratic regimes. This contrast underscores the importance of examining both theoretical and empirical relationships between regime type and economic development.

This section seeks to answer a fundamental question: Is a developmental state necessarily a democratic one? Or, put differently, is democracy a prerequisite for achieving economic development?

Various schools of thought have offered differing responses to this question:
The compatibility school argues for the primacy of democracy in the development process. It posits that economic development requires rules, institutions, and legal frameworks that must be democratic in nature. Democracies protect property rights, allocate resources efficiently, and foster political accountability through free elections, which in turn enhance economic dynamism and decision-making quality [1]. Moreover, democracy limits state intervention in the economy, thereby promoting market freedom and improving overall economic performance. Political participation also legitimizes policy decisions, and such legitimacy is a prerequisite for sustainable economic development.

In contrast, the conflict school contends that democratic systems-especially in developing countries-not only fail to facilitate economic development but may actually hinder it. Proponents argue that in the early stages of development, a difficult choice must be made in favor of rapid growth over democratic processes, as this phase demands strong state direction and effective governance. They further assert that development requires stability and coherent policymaking-conditions often absent in fragile or nascent democracies. For instance, Samuel Huntington emphasized that what truly matters for development is "political stability," not specific "political institutions" [2,3].

From Huntington's perspective, the critical factors are political stability and the degree of governance-not political development in the sense of democratization (Arsen Velen, 2003: 65).

Rentierism and the Rentier State

To better understand rentierism, we must first clarify the concept of "rent." One of the most widely cited definitions comes from David Pearce, who states: "Rent is a payment for a factor of production that exceeds the amount necessary to maintain its current use" (Rothbard, 2014 [1393 SH]). Adam Smith also offers a notable definition, distinguishing rent from other income sources such as wages and profits. According to Smith: "Rent enters into the price of commodities in a different manner than wages and profits. While high or low wages and profits directly affect prices, rent does not cause price fluctuations-it is rather a consequence of them" [4].

In essence, rent is not merely income accruing to a capital owner (e.g., land or property owner), but a reward for the ownership of natural resources. Ricardo similarly notes: "Mines and land are sources of rent for their owners, and this rent results from the high value of their products-not the cause of it" (Rothbard, 2014). Broadly speaking, rent refers to "income derived from natural endowments" (Rothbard, 2014). Thus, rent is income obtained without productive effort, standing in contrast to wages and profits, which are earned through labor and economic activity.

Having clarified the concept of rent, we now turn to the definition of the rentier state. One of the most influential definitions states: "Any state that derives a substantial portion of its revenue from external sources in the form of rent is considered a rentier state. In other words, a rentier state earns direct income from selling goods and services at prices significantly higher than their production costs due to specific conditions" [5].

The rentier state is a distinct manifestation of the rentier economy-an economy in which rent flows into the national system primarily through the state, rather than through intermediaries or private actors. Rentier economies are not limited to this model; in other forms, rent may be directly received by individuals or groups without state mediation-for example, remittances sent by foreign workers to their home countries. However, this study focuses on the first model, where rent is collected and distributed by the state.

In their seminal work The Rentier State, Beblawi and Luciani (1987) offer a comprehensive definition of the concept. They identify the following characteristics of a rentier state:
While all economies exhibit some rentier features, not all are rentier states. A state qualifies as rentier only if rent constitutes a substantial portion of national income. Beblawi and Luciani set a threshold of 42%, meaning any country where 42% or more of its total revenue derives from external rent qualifies as a rentier state.

These rents originate from external sources and are not linked to domestic production or industrial development.

In a rentier state, only a small fraction of the labor force is involved in rent generation, while the majority of society either receives or distributes rent.

The state is the principal recipient of external rent and plays a central role in its allocation and expenditure [5].

Based on these definitions, it follows that most raw material-exporting countries-especially oil producers-fall under the category of rentier states. The external revenues flowing directly into state coffers are largely disconnected from domestic productive activities and have profound implications for state-society relations.

Another key term is "rentierism," which refers to a specific mode of governance characterized by two core features:
Rent is controlled by the ruling elite (i.e., the political leadership).
The ruling elite uses rent to secure cooperation and control over society, thereby maintaining political stability.
Rentierism is thus an intrinsic aspect of rentier state behavior and governance. It has three major impacts:

Impact on the State

When the state is the exclusive recipient of rent, and rent is monopolized by the ruling elite, rentierism profoundly affects state structure. The rentier model is fully realized when rent is entirely under elite control, and those elites possess exclusive decision-making authority over its allocation. This monopoly is enabled by:
The state's access to vast rent revenues, which fosters independence from society and diminishes its reliance on public support. This autonomy allows the state to design and implement policies without consulting societal interests or public opinion.

Elites who control rent can use it to co-opt other groups and elites, effectively "buying" their loyalty or excluding them from the political arena. Rent thus enhances the state's autonomy vis-à-vis society and opposition groups, enabling it to preserve political stability through exclusive control over economic and political resources. In effect, the state and ruling elites become dominant actors in both the economic and political spheres, rendering civil society and opposition powerless.

Impact on State-Society Relations

Rent enables the state to bolster its legitimacy by distributing wealth to society. Rentier states often use rent to enhance public welfare and co-opt elites, thereby increasing their legitimacy. These co-optation strategies frequently take patrimonial or neo-patrimonial forms, relying on familial and tribal networks. Scholars such as Beblawi (1975) and Hossein Mahdavy (1970) argue that the dominant strategy of rentier elites is to distribute a portion of the vast rent-derived wealth to society-a populist and redistributive approach rather than a productive or developmental one. This distribution fosters public and elite support for the state and suppresses potential challenges to its authority [6].

Another consequence is the expansion of bureaucracy, which becomes the primary instrument for rent distribution. As noted by Ayubi and Beblawi, bureaucratic growth facilitates the systematic and institutionalized allocation of rent. Importantly, the state's distributive function focuses solely on rent-not on tax revenues. This leads to the hypothesis proposed by scholars like Rawkins and Beblawi: in rentier states, the absence of taxation results in an implicit social contract whereby citizens do not expect a representative or elected government. This core feature of rentierism undermines both democracy and development, promoting redistributive (rather than productive) policies and resulting in political and economic stagnation.

Impact on the Economy

Rent and rentier structures have significant effects on domestic economies, two of which are particularly noteworthy:

The emergence of a rent-seeking culture: Phrases like "overnight success" and the rise of speculative activities reflect a societal shift toward rent-seeking behavior. This culture fosters what Michael Chatelus calls a "circulatory economy," which he contrasts with a productive economy. He writes: "In circulatory economies, access to rent cycles is more important than productive efficiency. Anti-productive biases distort economic behavior and decision-making, as individuals and firms compete for rent rather than engage in efficient production" [7].

In response to rising consumer demands from newly affluent social groups, rentier states often expand imports of low-value-added and luxury goods, undermining domestic productive sectors. Mahdavy (1970) notes that one consequence of rent is the state's tendency to promote domestic production to reduce reliance on external rent. However, this often results in the creation of inefficient industries lacking global competitiveness, as they are not designed for market performance. Such patterns have been observed both before and after the Iranian Revolution.

Integrating Rentier State Theory with Neo-Patrimonialism

This article employs two theoretical frameworks-rentier economics and late rentierism-to explain the persistence of political stability in the Gulf region. These frameworks are not parallel; rather, late rentierism complements and addresses the shortcomings of classical rentier-oil economics. It emphasizes diversification within oil and gas-related activities, a shift toward liberalized markets, financial and stock exchange activities, and broad social freedoms alongside limited political liberties-all as tactical mechanisms for the survival of hereditary absolutist regimes in the Persian Gulf.

While classical rentier theory is more applicable to the early post-independence years of these states, late rentierism becomes increasingly relevant as oil revenues decline, political awareness grows, and democratization and secularization trends intensify [8].

Some scholars propose a theoretical synthesis between the rentier state model and neo-patrimonialism (or sultanistic governance). Specifically, the personalization of power and the concentration of political authority in the hands of the ruler-core features of neo-patrimonialism-align with key attributes of the rentier state: monopolistic control over resource revenues, independence from society, authoritarian and supra-class governance, and the accumulation of wealth by the ruler. Together, these elements reinforce one another and yield the following outcomes:

- Centralized political authority and consolidation of an authoritarian regime detached from society
- A significantly weakened society vis-à-vis a dominant state
- The emergence of a corrupt patron-client network, wherein the state-controlling vast oil and gas revenues-distributes portions of rent to influential socio-political actors in exchange for absolute political loyalty and obedience

Further research by scholars such as Michael Ross, Hazem Beblawi, and Giacomo Luciani has reached similar conclusions. These studies link the distributive-specialized functions of rentier states directly to regime survival and political legitimacy.

Late Rentierism and the Gulf Monarchies

The shift among Gulf Arab states toward economic diversification and reduced dependence on oil and gas has led to the emergence of late rentierism, a theory advanced by Matthew Gray. This framework critiques classical rentier state theory and seeks to address its limitations, which include:

- Economic reductionism and determinism, neglecting cultural, historical, and political factors in explaining authoritarian resilience

- Overlooking the potential for rentier states to embrace global markets and liberal economic reforms-a trend that has intensified in the Gulf since the 1990s
- Underestimating the political-security vulnerabilities of rentier states and overstating their autonomy from society
- Ignoring internal variations in rent dependency among rentier states-for example, the share of oil and gas in the export basket of GCC countries ranges from 13% in Bahrain to 65% in Kuwait (Gray, 2011: 9–13)

Late rentierism does not represent a complete departure from classical theory; rather, it builds upon it. It retains the two core functions of the classical model-repressive-mobilizing and welfare-distributive-but adds a third dimension: diversified modernization. This refers to economic diversification, reduced reliance on hydrocarbons, deeper integration into global markets, and expanded cultural and social freedoms. Dubai's transformation into the region's leading hub for foreign investment exemplifies this trajectory [9].

In economic terms, late rentierism reflects deeper integration into the global economy. Politically, it aligns with the model of a "responsive but non-democratic state."

Applying Late Rentierism to the GCC Countries

Economic Dimension

Among Gulf Arab states, the GCC countries have led the transition toward global economic openness and foreign investment. They exhibit the highest reduction in oil dependency and the most pronounced shift toward open-market economies. The share of oil and gas in GDP has dropped to 13%, positioning the GCC as the clearest embodiment of late rentierism.

However, this interpretation must be tempered by two caveats: Most economic resources still originate from petroleum and condensates, meaning product dependency remains high even if revenue dependency has declined. The domestic private sector is not truly independent; it remains closely tied to the state and embedded within corrupt patron-client networks dominated by ruling sheikhs. These factors suggest that capitalism in the GCC is a form of dependent, comprador, crony, familial, and distorted capitalism-far removed from the mechanisms of genuine free-market economies. The shadow of the state and ruling families looms large overall economic sectors [10].

Political Dimension

Politically, the concept of a "responsive but non-democratic state" is key. These governments undertake superficial reforms to preempt dissent, but such reforms lack depth. They respond to economic and welfare demands but refuse to hold free elections or transfer power to diverse political factions.

In addition to adopting this model, several factors explain the GCC's resistance to democratization movements such as the Arab Spring: Institutionalized tribal and citizenship-based cultural structures, Opposition from conservative Islamist and Salafi groups to deep reforms, Weak civil society institutions, Continued large-scale welfare and distributive functions.

Extensive patronage networks encompassing most private firms and government agencies, leaving no room for an independent administrative, governmental, or labor class [11].

These factors fall under the "exceptionalist" approach, which argues that due to these unique conditions, the Gulf monarchies-particularly the GCC states-are likely to maintain political stability and avoid major transformations even in the long term [12].

In contrast, the "normalist" approach contends that Gulf Arab states, like all others, cannot remain immune to democratic waves. The difference lies only in the timing and intensity of democratization. According to this view, while the GCC countries currently resist democratization due to strong traditional legitimacy, tribal structures, and rentier-oil economics, this resistance will gradually erode. Eventually, they will be unable to withstand the pressures of regional and global democratic movements [12].

Demographic Structure of GCC Countries and Its Relationship to Political Stability

Demographics play a critical role in national security and political stability. Key factors include population composition, age distribution, migration patterns (emigration and immigration), and the political mobilization of migrants. Since the 1970s, following the sharp rise in oil prices, GCC countries adopted aggressive economic development policies. Due to insufficient domestic labor, they began importing large numbers of workers from Arab, African, and Asian countries-especially India [13]. This influx has been so extensive that non-nationals now constitute over 80% of the resident population in GCC countries. Most of these migrants are employed in the private sector at low wages. Access to public sector jobs is highly restricted, with most government positions and political offices reserved for native GCC citizens and affiliates of ruling sheikhs. Thus, migrants are virtually absent from the upper echelons of governance. The limited presence of non-Arab individuals in high-level positions should not be interpreted as genuine political inclusion of non-GCC nationals. This demographic imbalance is viewed as a latent threat to national security. However, this potential threat has never materialized into an actual political challenge. Politically, the formation of political parties is prohibited in GCC countries, and non-nationals are barred from organizing to demand rights-unlike Kurdish parties in Turkey or Iraq. Consequently, non-nationals lack political and civic rights and are treated as guest workers. The dominant population-non-native migrants-remains politically inert, passive, and conservative, with minimal influence on governance [14]. Moreover, the standard of living for non-nationals in GCC countries is significantly higher than in their countries of origin, rendering the GCC a "promised land" for many. This reality discourages any political activism that might jeopardize their residency.

Prospects for Democratization in GCC Countries

With widespread modernization-urbanization, communication, economic development, education-new social forces have emerged, particularly among the youth. This generational shift has led to a "silent revolution," laying the groundwork for future democratization. Currently, both native citizens and the 85% non-native population remain politically inactive. Political dissent is largely reformist, focused on civil rights rather than systemic political change. The primary demand of political activists has been to expand the powers of the National Assembly, though its limited influence is widely acknowledged [12].

In line with the "responsive but non-democratic state" model, GCC governments have enacted superficial reforms to appear accountable. For example, in 2011, relatively free elections were held for 40 seats in the National Assembly. However, as noted, the Assembly holds negligible power compared to the entrenched networks of ruling sheikhs.

Political sociology outlines three models of democratic transition:

Top-down liberalization: This occurs when growing social forces-especially opposition groups-compel ruling elites to initiate gradual political reforms due to pressure or incapacity [15]. In the GCC context, late rentierism and the responsive-but-non-democratic model have led to extensive welfare reforms, economic diversification, and highly superficial political changes. There is no serious commitment to reform, making this model unlikely in the short term-though it may materialize in the long run [15].

Negotiated transition: The prospect of ruling sheikhs voluntarily transferring power to the people and holding free elections for all political offices is politically and logically implausible in the near future.

Revolutionary transition: Given the absence of a strong opposition and lack of bottom-up pressure from the populace, a revolutionary path to democracy seems improbable. However, Cipriani notes: "The current political deadlock in the Gulf region will be broken-and is already beginning to break-but the pace is slow for now, though it will not remain slow in the future" [17].

In the long term, several factors may catalyze a revolutionary transition: Intergenerational transformation and the rise of a new middle class: A growing gap between this class and the ruling elite may initiate a revolutionary process [9]. Unsustainability of oil revenues: Rentier-oil economies and the high welfare standards they support cannot guarantee regime survival indefinitely.Expansion of digital communication and social media: The possibility of "Facebook" or "Twitter" revolutions, akin to Egypt's experience, cannot be ruled out [18]. Global waves of democratization and egalitarianism: These trends are eroding tribal identities and hereditary legitimacy, posing serious risks to regimes that rely on such foundations [19-29].

Conclusion

An examination of the relationship between political systems and economic performance reveals several key findings: There is no universal model linking regime type to economic outcomes. Countries with similar political systems often exhibit vastly different economic performances. No specific form of political regime can be prescribed as a universally effective formula for achieving economic development. Historical evidence suggests that variables such as governance quality, administrative efficiency, and the ideological orientation of ruling elites-whether democratic or authoritarian-have had a greater impact on economic development than the mere type of political system. This article adopted a hybrid approach, integrating elements of rentier state theory with neo-patrimonialism (or sultanistic governance). Specifically, the personalization of power and the concentration of political authority in the hands of the ruler-core features of neo-patrimonialism-complement the rentier state's monopolistic control over resource revenues, its autonomy from society, its supra-class authoritarian nature, and the accumulation of wealth by the ruler. Together, these elements reinforce one another and yield the following outcomes:

- Political centralization and the consolidation of an authoritarian regime detached from society
- A significantly weakened society vis-à-vis a dominant state
- The emergence of a corrupt patron-client network, wherein the state-controlling vast oil and gas revenues-distributes portions of rent to influential socio-political actors in exchange for absolute political loyalty
- Economically, the GCC countries have led the region in opening up to global markets and attracting foreign investment. They represent the most prominent example of late rentierism.
- Politically, the GCC countries exemplify the “responsive but non-democratic state.” These governments undertake superficial political reforms to preempt dissent, but such reforms lack depth. They respond to economic and welfare demands but refuse to hold free elections or transfer power to diverse political factions.

Regarding the delayed democratization in the Gulf-particularly in the United Arab Emirates-this study, using the “normalist” approach, concludes that Gulf Arab states cannot remain immune to global democratic waves. The difference lies only in the timing and intensity of democratization. While the GCC countries currently resist democratization due to strong traditional legitimacy, tribal structures, and rentier-oil economics, this resistance is likely to erode over time. Eventually, they will be unable to withstand the pressures of regional and global democratic movements.

In summary, political stability in the Gulf region is rooted in a constellation of structural variables, the most significant of which include:

- The rentier economic structure and the resulting autonomy and empowerment of the state
- Functional-welfare legitimacy, or technocratic welfare governance
- Neo-patrimonial power structures and tribal socio-cultural frameworks
- Diversified modernization and movement toward a mixed economy, as emphasized in late rentierism
- The emergence of a responsive state in economic and welfare domains, coupled with a non-responsive and non-democratic stance in political governance
- Dependence on external powers and the active presence of extra-regional actors in the Persian Gulf
- A predominantly non-native population-85% of GCC residents are non-citizens-who remain politically passive, silent, and conservative

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