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The Other Arab Awakening

The radical revolutions made news. What about the radical evolutions?

AND so it turns out that there were actually two Arab awakenings. There are the radical revolutions you've read about in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya, none of which yet have built stable, inclusive democracies. But then there are the radical evolutions that you've not read about, playing out in Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf monarchies. The evolutions involve a subtle but real shift in relations between leaders and their people, and you can detect it from even a brief visit to Saudi Arabia, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The Gulf leaders still have no time for one-man, one-vote democracy. But, in the wake of the Arab Spring, they're deeply concerned with their legitimacy, which they are discovering can no longer just be bought with more subsidies — or passed from father to son. So more and more leaders are inviting their people to judge them by how well they perform — how well they improve schools, create jobs and fix sewers — not just resist Israel or Iran or impose Islam.

And, thanks in large part to the Internet, more people are doing just that. The role of the Internet was overrated in Egypt and Tunisia. But it is underrated in the Gulf, where, in these more closed societies, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are providing vast uncontrolled spaces for men and women to talk to each other — and back at their leaders. "I don't read any local newspapers anymore," a young Saudi techie told me. "I get all my news from Twitter." So much for government-controlled newspapers.

Saudi Arabia alone produces almost half of all tweets in the Arab world and is among the most Twitter- and YouTube-active nations in the world. By far, those Saudis with the most Twitter and YouTube followers tend to be Wahhabi fundamentalist preachers, but gaining on them are satirists, comedians and commentators, who poke fun at all aspects of Saudi society, including — usually indirectly — the religious establishment, which is no longer off limits.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who in Gulf Arab terms is a real progressive, remains widely popular, but his government bureaucracy is seen as unresponsive and too often corrupt. That's why Saudi Twitter users have recently created these Arabic hashtags: "#If I met the King, I would tell him"; "#From the people to the King: education is at risk" and "#What Would You Like to Say to the Minister of Health?" (after repeated hospital mishaps).

There were torrential rainstorms when I was in Saudi Arabia 10 days ago and the Saudi newspaper, *Al-Sharq alAwsat*, published a cartoon with three men answering this question: Why did all the streets of Riyadh flood? The government official answers: "The streets didn't flood. That's just a vicious rumor." The sheikh answers: "It's all because of the sins of the girls at Princess Nora University." The citizen says: "It's because of corruption" — but then the cartoon shows an arm labeled "censorship" coming from off the page to snip off this comment. That is in a Saudi paper!

In the United Arab Emirates, a government official was recently embarrassed when he was captured on a cellphone video, after a traffic accident, beating the other driver, an Asian worker, with the rope from his headdress. The video went viral across the Gulf.

People are losing their fear — not to revolt, but to demand clean accountable governance. Last week, a Saudi friend shared with me a video that went viral there on What's App that was posted by a poor man whose roof leaked during the rainstorms, even into his baby's bassinet. He can be seen stalking around his rainsoaked house, saying: "I am Saudi. This is how I live. ... Where is the minister of housing? Where are the billions the king has given for housing? ... Where are my rights? ... I feel like being in my home and being in the street are the same."

I heard many of these stories during group conversations with young Saudis and Emeratis, who I found to be as impressive, connected and high-aspiring to reform their countries as any of their revolutionary cohorts in Egypt. But they want evolution not revolution. They've seen the footage from Cairo and Damascus. You can feel their energy — from the grass-roots movement to let women drive to the young Saudi who whispers that he's so fed up with the puritanical Islam that dominates his country he's become an atheist, and he is not alone. Saudi atheists? Who knew?

Talk about reform — in Dubai, the government has set a strategy for 2021, and each of the 46 ministries and regulatory agencies has three-year Key Performance Indicators, or K.P.I.'s, they have to fulfill to get there, ranging from improving the success of Dubai 15-year-olds in global science, math and reading exams to making it even easier to start a new business. All 3,600 K.P.I.'s are loaded on an iPad dashboard that the ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, follows each week. Maryam al-Hammadi, 48, the director of government performance, strikes fear in the heart of every minister in Dubai because each month she ranks them by who is making the most progress toward achieving their K.P.I.'s, and Sheikh Mohammed gets the list. You don't want to be at the bottom. Hammadi showed me the dashboard and explained that Sheikh Mohammed is demanding that "every government agency perform as well as the private sector in customer satisfaction and service." The public will get an annual report.

Again, this is not about democracy. It's about leaders feeling the need to earn their legitimacy. But when one leader does it, others feel the pressure to copy. And that leads to more transparency and more accountability. And that, and more Twitter, leads to who knows what.