ABSTRACT

The monarchies of the GCC have developed particular institutions of family rule that have enabled their survival through the tumultuous twentieth century. In these ‘dynastic’ monarchies the ruling family monopolizes the highest state offices, controls the institutions of the state by distributing family members throughout the bureaucracy, and has developed mechanisms for settling family disputes – especially over succession. Although led by an individual King, Amir, or Sultan, in none of the GCC monarchies does a sole leader rule without a degree of influence and consultation from his broader family. Yet, the nature and institutionalization of pluralism within the ruling family is one area with there is a significant degree of variation between the GCC states. Moreover in recent years, the various GCC regimes have developed and reformed the institutional mechanisms of family rule.

This paper highlights and compares and contrasts some of the dynamics of rule making of succession and the related tools that are employed to keep the GCC dynastic regimes from splitting. In the past few decades all of the GCC monarchies have moved towards some sort of constitutional texts, or basic laws, that address the rules of succession. Moreover, the issue of primogeniture as a norm of succession is beginning to take hold in the region – although agnatic succession still provides an alternative mechanism. With the growing solidification of these secession rules in the context of ever growing ruling families, GCC regimes have also employed a number of different consolation prizes to accommodate family pluralism. These tools keep unsuccessful princes within the regime’s fold to avoid debilitating and paralyzing family battles. The central tendencies and variations in these rules and tools can help scholars understand the dynamics of monarchical rule in the Gulf and of non-democratic rule in other contexts.