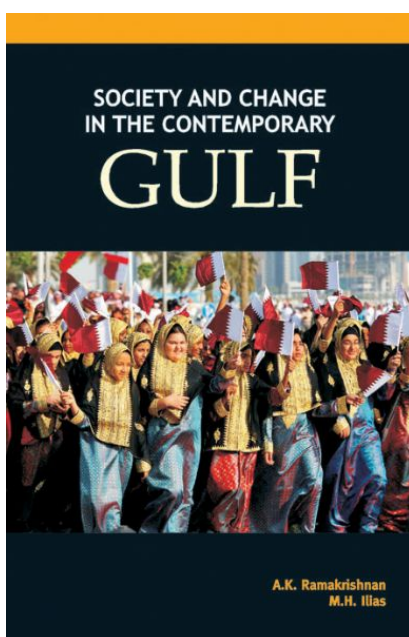


# **MEI BOOK REVIEW**

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## **Society and Change in the Contemporary Gulf**

A K Ramakrishnan and M H Ilias  
Editors

New Century Publications, New Delhi  
2011, 238 pages

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After the recent upheavals in the Middle East which have been called the ‘Arab Spring’ by scholars, a number of articles and books are being written on the political and economic scenario of the region and also the spill-over effect that this change is having on the rest of the world. This book is an exception which tries to look into the societal aspects of the Gulf. A collection of essays edited by A K Ramakrishnan and M H Ilias, the book addresses the general aspects of the societal changes the Persian Gulf is witnessing, as well as some of the nuances of the different milieus of the region. This book deals with themes ranging from women’s issues in Saudi Arabia to women’s issues in general in the Gulf region world as well as the directions of the democratizations, changing dynamics of cities like Dubai, economic diversifications in the Gulf and society’s link to them. The interesting part of this book lies in the fact that it tries to explain the changes in the society

and politics of the region, with a steady view towards history, sometimes from a theoretical point of view.

This book consists of 12 chapters, some of which have dealt with the societal changes in particular nations. For example, the chapters written by Amelie Le Renard, Stephen J. Ramos, M H Ilias, Edward Burke, Gareth Doherty and Shelly Johny deal with nations like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman. Some of the other chapters are on the societal changes in Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, the regional or economic changes, or rather the “regional and economic challenges,” as Rushda A. Siddiqui has put it, in the region and the response of the Persian Gulf to them. The effect of the rentier economy in the Gulf has also been dealt with.

The status of women is an appealing issue which has been dealt in this book in two chapters, one specially dedicated to Saudi Arabia and the other to women in the Gulf in general and their role in education. By dealing with such issues which are sure to gather interest of readers, this book has ventured onto a tried and tested path. Both the articles ended in harping on the same tune, i.e. in spite of the developments in the status of the women, how the tradition is holding them back from the attainment of freedom. The problem of the Shiite community in Bahrain is nicely put in Edward Burke’s chapter named ‘Reaching a threshold: The Stagnation of the Reform Process in Bahrain,’ where author posited that, with the lack of institutionalized mechanisms, concrete legislations and independent judiciary, even the monarch’s attempt to bring about changes in the country does not yield fruitful results. But when it comes to the discussion of society, the other chapter devoted to Bahrain seemed to deal with quite a peripheral issue of Bahraini society’s cultural link with gray-green of the date-palm plantations of the country. Rushda Siddiqui’s attempt to throw light on the different challenges in this region also has become fragile in an attempt to club together a lot of issues.

David B. Roberts, in his contribution to this book has discussed the societal change that has taken place in two phases, one after the colonialism and second after the discovery of oil and how the Arab world has changed. This chapter clearly depicts how the idea of nations in the Arab world has been borrowed from the West. Facts have been brilliantly theorized in this arena of discussion by both the editors, Ramakrishnan and Ilias, in their attempt to discuss Dubai as an alienated city from the mass of the population to attract the foreigners, as well as the neo-liberal transformations taking place in the Gulf. Some chapters like the ones by Shelly Johny and Stephen J. Ramos are more detailed with facts which are aptly contextualized.

However when it comes to the discussion of society in the Gulf as a whole, with an eye on the changes that were and are taking place, this book has successfully dealt with the subject matter. Although it has taken the beaten track and also nations like Kuwait and Qatar are left out completely, this book reached its goal.

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