

The United Arab Emirates. A Study in Survival, Christopher M. Davidson, Boulder, London, Lynne Rienner, 2005, 333 pp., HB £42.50

Perhaps more than any other Middle Eastern state, the federation of the United Arab Emirates has been built on oil. Nonetheless, so far the UAE have not been systematically analyzed in the context of broader debates on 'rentier states' and the 'resource curse'. Christopher Davidson's book is first of all a broad survey of politics and development in the UAE, but it is also the first book on the country which draws heavily on the concepts of rent and rentierism.

Davidson combines rentier state analysis with elements of dependency theory and what he calls 'modernization revisionism', an account of how traditional institutions can be adapted to a modern political context. Five chapters cover the political history of the UAE and its component emirates, the factors for monarchical survival, socio-economic development, political 'pathologies', and the impact of globalization on UAE economics and civil society.

The history chapter is substantial and concisely written. Arguing that pre-oil social and political structures shaped later trajectories of development, Davidson explains the political economy of the pearl trade in the Gulf and the trade connections with Asia. A good summary is given of the historiographic debates about so-called 'piracy' of the Qasimi tribes at the East Arabian coast, which led to several British interventions and an increasingly hegemonic British presence.

In a typical colonial pattern, this presence empowered some local players (a local 'client elite') while it defeated others, and it froze the resulting political set-up for many years to come. Britain assumed control over the foreign relations of the various Emirates and paid limited strategic subsidies to its clients, giving them growing autonomy over their local subjects. Increasingly, the Empire also controlled access to economic activities, preventing foreigners from entering the pearling business. A brief history of the unsuccessful Dubai reform movement in the 1930s reminds the reader that this trade-focused Emirate was not always as apolitical as it appears nowadays.

The history chapter closes with the British-inspired creation of the UAE federation, which originally was supposed to include Bahrain and Qatar.

Discussing the resilience of monarchy in the UAE, Davidson tries to show how local shaikhly elites have overcome Huntington's 'king's dilemma', which posits that both reactionary and reforming monarchs tend to undermine their own power base. The author subsumes factors of survival under the two broad headings of legitimacy and rentierism. To bolster their legitimacy, UAE rulers draw on enduring personal authority, extended patrimonial networks which offer indirect allegiance tied to social mobility, and various cultural, religious and ideological resources. In addition, the two-level identity tying subjects to both the UAE and the individual Emirates adds cohesion and flexibility to the system.

As importantly, Davidson argues, nationals are tied to the regimes through a new 'rentier network', distributing jobs, welfare and other perks. Tied up with neopatrimonial structures of exchange and authority, this prevents liberal political development as predicted by old school modernization theory. Indeed, oil wealth has strengthened many features of the traditional polity.

Davidson is at his most original when he compares the UAE to Kuwait, in which politics has been much more contested by middle class and organized merchant elites. He points out that the oil boom kicked in at a much later time in the UAE, and following the demise of the pearl trade, the old merchant class had been so weakened through decades of scarcity that they could not claim a collective say in politics. UAE rulers as rentier latecomers therefore enjoy fuller control.

The chapter about development and diversification has more of a survey character. After a fleeting reference to the 'dependent circumstances' of the UAE, the book summarizes industrialization and technology transfer efforts, agricultural policies, commerce and tourism development, educational expansion, and the push for the 'Emiratization' of the workforce. Some interesting detail is given about the psychological problems of the frequently all-male labour environment in the Emirates. Davidson compares the substrategies of Abu Dhabi and Dubai and summarizes federal development problems such as the lack of economic balance between the Emirates, duplication of projects, overlap of jurisdictions and weakness of federal institutions.

The subsequent chapter returns to UAE politics and its 'pathologies'. The author points out that many development problems in the UAE—such as pervasive rent-seeking, entitlement thinking and the competition between various elites—are results of the very reinvigorated traditional structures that allowed for political consolidation in the first place. Chambers of commerce, judiciary and Central Bank lack independence, and the federal structure makes for additional political and legislative immobility. Davidson uses the BCCI investment scandal of the early 1990s to illustrate lack of administrative oversight and accountability under Shaikh Zayed.

One further factor of political stalemates, the book argues, is the faultline between conservative 'old rentiers' and reformist 'new rentiers' in the political elite. Looking at the chapter's list of liberalizing reforms which have been blocked by 'old rentiers', the two camps appear almost synonymous with Abu Dhabi and Dubai, respectively. Unable to change the federal rules quickly, Dubai has effectively circumvented some of the legal restrictions on foreign investment and real estate property through its 'free zone' enclaves.

The book is at its most daring in the final chapter which investigates the impact of economic and cultural globalization on the UAE. Davidson holds that globalization could either reinforce existing pathologies or engender true liberalization. A useful section analyzes the co-optation and patronage of 'civil so' in today's UAE, which Davidson hopes could be invigorated through the presence of international organizations and the spread of international communications.

The book is essentially a country study covering all aspects of UAE politics and economics. Its breadth is impressive, the details useful, the analysis in sections excellent and the bibliography comprehensive. Many concepts from the rentier state and other debates are applied to the UAE for the first time.

At the same time, the theoretical framework in many ways appears additive rather than offering a synthesis of different approaches. As the ambition of the book is not primarily theory-building, this is not a fundamental criticism. Nonetheless, the partial use of the theoretical literature, often relying on secondary readings, sometimes appears slightly sloppy.

There are several examples of under-defined and overlapping terms: the nature of the UAE rulers' personal authority remains unclear, and so do—apart from a reference to Palestine - their ideological resources. The difference between neo-patrimonial structures and rentier networks, presented under different headings, remains elusive.

Broader concepts like 'dependency' and 'modernization revisionism' largely disappear either after the introduction or the history chapter. The nature of current dependency is never quite explained, and it is absent from the important chapter on domestic 'pathologies'—which in itself is a fuzzy term that seems to encompass both rentierism and weaknesses of the federal set-up. 'Rent' is never defined and at the same time strangely ubiquitous, as even new foreign investment and the free zones are interpreted as devices by 'new rentiers' to skim off rent.

This should not detract from the great achievements of the book: It will be a highly useful resource for both students and researchers and has filled a glaring gap. Its individual sections are perceptively written and well-referenced, often based on previously unused primary sources. It brings the UAE back to the academic debate, which is as high an achievement as a country study can accomplish.

Stephen Hertog © 2007