

Monarchy vs. Democratization in Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

The question posed in the organization memos are most important in understanding the lack of democratization in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 2004, as Abdullah was increasing his hold on power, prior to Fahd's death, there was very substantial liberalization in Riyadh. This was the "Spring" of Riyadh. The country was speaking of elections, meaning elections to the Majlis asShura, increased freedom of the press, talks of women voting and increased criticism of the religious enforcers. Increased oil revenues and subsequent government spending boosted the improvement in people's welfare after years of decline in GDP per capita and government deficits. This economic growth contributed to the general optimism felt by all visitors to the Kingdom.

However, after a series of terrorist attacks, the liberalization came to a quick end. Elections, which had been promised by Abdullah, did take place, but only to toothless municipal councils. Many liberal writers and intellectuals were summarily arrested, while the religious establishment figures were left alone. In other words, just like Fahad after the Mekkah incident in 1979 had surrendered society to the Sahwa, to undermine the influence of the extremists Wahhabi, Abdullah agreed in 2005 to curb the liberals, to pre-empt any alliance between the Sahwa and al Qaida extremists.

Today, Abdullah as King is seen as very liberal [although in the 1970s he was seen as the most conservative member of the royal family], strongly opposed to the Salafi¹ influence on society. He is encouraging the extreme economic development taking place in Saudi Arabia. He is promoting the rights of women and liberalizing education. He is encouraging debates on important subjects at the Majlis asShura, although he is not bound by their recommendations. These policies, willingly or not, are actually marginalizing the Salafis.

¹ The term is somewhat misleading. Stéphane Lacroix just argued in a lecture at CSIS on May 29th, 2008, that the present religious establishment in Saudi Arabia is the Sahwa- the Re-awakening. The Sahwa coalesced in the 1960's from the numerous Akhwan who were taking refuge in the kingdom from Nasser and other nationalistic-military regimes around and the old line Wahabis. The Sahwa according to Lacroix now controls the religious and educational sphere. Of course they also control the Mutawa'in. The Sahwa today is torn between the more worldly Akhwan who minimize the differences between Sunnis and Shi'a to ally all good Moslems against Western influence and the traditional Wahabis who are interested mostly in the purity of the religious practice- hence rejecting all Western influence but mostly emphasize the rejection of all heretic views within Islam, especially the Shi'as and Sufis. All call themselves Salafis [followers of Mohamed's teachings].

However, none of the King's policies are moving the kingdom in the direction of increased democratization. In fact "Democracy" as an idea seems to be rejected by most groups, for fear that real elections would give control to one group over another for the future.

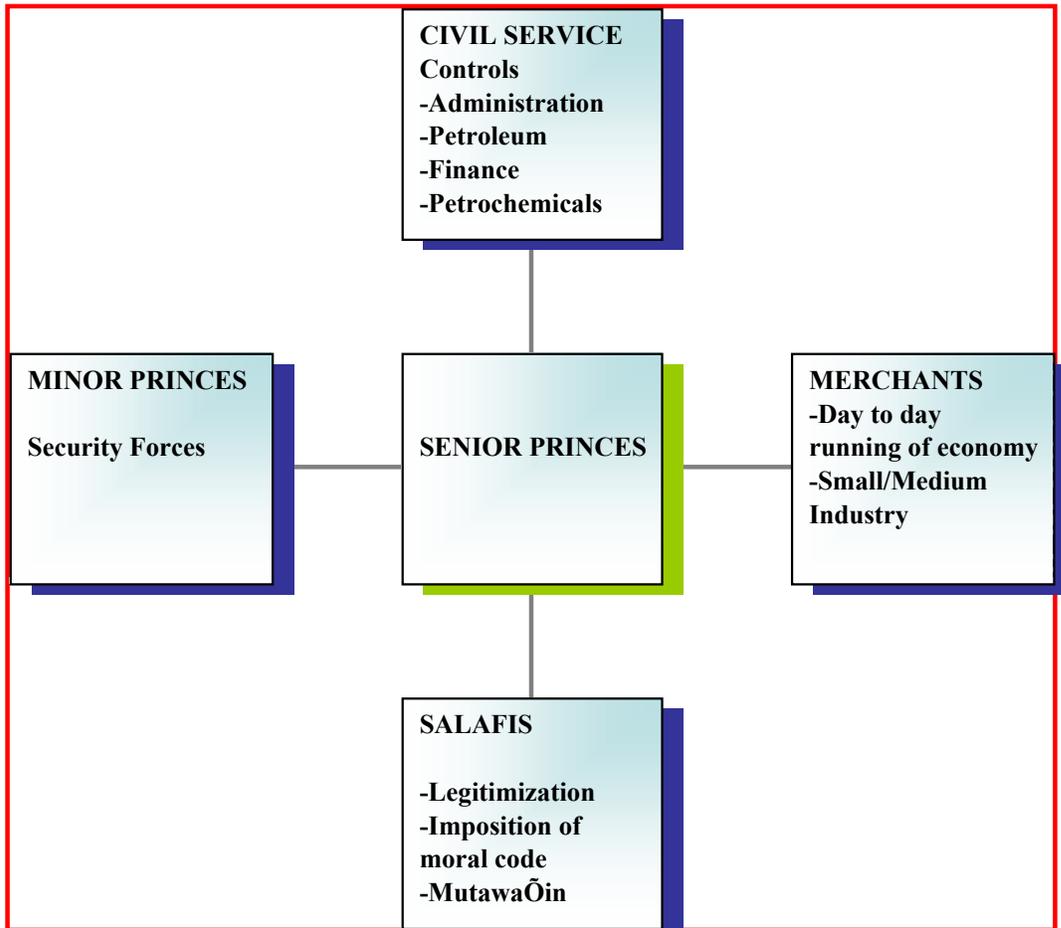
Nevertheless, one sees increased participation through the unelected Majlis asShura or the partially elected but powerless municipal councils. The judiciary is being very slowly reformed to be more professional, but not more independent. The succession has been "routinized" to improve the chances of princes known for their merit rather than for their ability to take large bribes [cf, the present Crown Prince Sultan]. The status and opportunities given to women are increasing daily. The King, the civil service and the merchants openly challenge The Salafis' prominence in education, albeit with mixed results. However, the major socio-political groups are not asking for increased "democracy". They want more participation, but not power sharing, which they all seem willing to surrender to the devil they know-the King, rather than to an amorphous devil they don't know, that could come from free elections.

The Saudi Arabian Socio-Political Scene

A short presentation of the socio-political structure of the Kingdom, may give some perspective on the evolution [or lack thereof] of the monarchy in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi socio-political system seems to revolve around a core of senior princes who adjudicate issues that arise between four main socio-political groups: the civil servants, the merchants, the Salafis and the junior princes. The senior princes at the center of this socio-economic sphere are like a diamond. They reflect different views and are seen as supporting one group or the other, but in reality are very strongly united in their ultimate goal of preserving their control of power. Hence, yesterday Abdullah was seen as the main conservative senior prince and today is seen as the most liberal, switching place with the Sudairis [Sultan, Naif, Salman] seen in the past as the reformers and now as allied with the Salafis. The civil service, in which I include Saudi Aramco, SABIC and the main state run conglomerates, is running the economy and the financial system. It tries to Saudi-ize the economy, to develop a modern educational agenda, bring women into the workforce and by and large throw the country into the 21 st century. It has a vision of the Kingdom to be a leading industrial power by 2020. This brings it in constant conflict with the merchants who do not

wish to Saudi-ize and are happy with the semi-slavery system, which gives them plentiful and very cheap labor. The civil service also runs into constant conflict with the Salafis, who, for their part, need the support and funding of the core princes to achieve their agenda of spreading their version of Wahhabism, maintain a stranglehold on education, keep women away from public society, and proselytize in the rest of the world. As to the junior princes, they are very



much disliked by all the other groups and depend on their seniors to keep access to their yearly rent, control of the security forces and in general maintain their lifestyle.

None of the four groups can deal with each other. They have no forum for such exchanges. All have very strong non-negotiable agendas. For example, the civil service in constant battles with the Salafis, who want to control the educational system and the daily life of people and women. The civil service can only achieve its vision of the Kingdom through the support of the core senior princes who often, but not always adjudicate in their favor. At this time, the civil service seems to have the support of the King against the Salafis and the parasitic smaller princes, but not against the Merchants who have mounted a strong and effective lobby.

This adjudication against the Salafis is relatively new. In the past two years King Abdullah and his advisors seem to take position against the Salafis. For example, the efforts to modernize education are taken away from the Salafi controlled ministries of education. Women are encouraged to work. The religious police is under pressure to stop harassing citizens. Under King Fahad and after the uprising in Mecca in 1979, the senior princes had allied with the Salafis and the junior princes against the civil service and the merchants to limit freedoms in society, limit growth and isolate the Saudi population from the rest of the world. King Abdullah is very popular and the Salafis cannot mount a successful resistance to his support of the modernization efforts pushed by the civil service and the merchants. It is difficult to know whether the King is alone in this approach, but one can surmise that the second-generation princes support his stance, as well as many of the first generation ones. After all, the system is working very well at this time, and no one can complain that things are worse now than before. In fact the new committee on succession is set up in great part to ensure the legacy of Abdullah. The 34 members of the Baya committee have the right to turn down any Crown Prince and even to remove a King if judged in ill health. One could surmise that the committee has been designed to ensure that the princes closest to the Salafis may not reach power.

As population grew extremely rapidly and globalization started taking hold in Saudi Arabia, calls for participation became intense, culminating in the petitions of the Spring of Riyadh in 2002-2003. Democratization was somewhat assuaged when the then Crown Prince Abdullah promised elections. These elections were expected to be to the appointed Majlis asShura, but ended up to be for toothless municipal councils. Indeed, if the socio-political scene mentioned above is close to reality, an elected parliament would play the role of the adjudicating body now played by the senior princes. In other words if a parliament gets elected, the various groups in society would have an institution in which they can talk, bargain and deal without having the imposition of a ruling by the royal family.

It seems that none of the actors wish to have a powerful Majlis asShura. Indeed, the elections which were run in the rest of the Gulf and for the local council in Saudi Arabia, showed that the Salafis win most contests and thus could control a freely elected Parliament, thereby endangering the agenda of three of the four main groups as well as threatening the power of the core princes. Even though they have been winners in the past, the Salafis

themselves could fear true elections and a resulting strong Parliament in which merchants and progressive technocrats could one day control the agenda. Each of the four groups have a strong vision of where they want the country and the society to go. Since, with elections and real power to a Majlis asShura, any one of them could lose access to power and their chance to push their vision, they prefer to let the senior princes adjudicate the decision. This way, they may not get all they want, but will get a portion of the loaf.

Explanations for stability.

Does the monarchy control a significant chunk of the national economy to prevent economic challengers to the status quo?

The monarchy funds itself and its co-optation of the various groups through its control of the oil production and the major economic development taking place today. However, the control is quite indirect. Saudi Arabia is very successful economically today because the civil service is in charge of the economy. By and large the sectors of the economy related to income generating and development are free of corruption.

Is economic growth under the monarchy a factor for stability?

The monarchy appears to be using the promotion of economic growth as a means to marginalize the Salafis and the minor princes who may not want to see globalization bring changes to the system. Growth is so extensive that it does create some imbalances in the economy. At present the main challenge is the increase in inflation due to the increase in demand for all goods from food to housing. This pressure is presently met by the government through substantial increases in salaries for the civil service and pressure on the private sector to hire more Saudis and increase the salary of their Saudi employees. The increases in salary of course only generate more inflation.

On the other hand the economic growth is generating a great deal of pride among Saudis who now view the Kingdom as achieving the status of a major industrial power. It also leads to improved opportunities for the average Saudi and brings women into society. Of course, Saudi Arabian are increasingly under pressure to find “good jobs at good wages” for themselves-both men and women-to feed and maintain their families.

Many Saudis seem to fear a Salafi dominated society, which could bring the new economic miracle to an end. Certainly as Lacroix has mentioned the Sahwa- ie the religious establishment- is the only group that can mobilize to bring people in the street or get its members elected. Hence this explains why the civil service and the merchants do not wish to have a democratic state, which, in their mind, would undoubtedly bring the Sahwa to power.

Does the monarchy enjoy a level of legitimacy that other institutions in the country do not?

The present king has a level of popularity not seen since King Faysal in the 1960s and 1970s. He is a charismatic figure seen as being free of corruption and able to understand the average person's problems. Hence, the present king enjoys more legitimacy than any other person and by extension any other institution. It seems that Saudis prefer to have any strong king like Abdullah. Even in the event of Abdullah's death, the Saudis may accept a less charismatic king for fear of the alternative. The Baya committee is bound to improve the choice of leadership and remove the long term power of the potentially corrupt successors like Prince Sultan. The next king [after Sultan dies] will be chosen by a large group of senior princes and hopefully will settle one of the more competent member of the family.

Does the monarchy have support from important international actors, including first and foremost the United States?

One must assume that the US supports the present regime. However, the present regime does not necessarily feel supported by the present US administration. The efforts to impose democracy to the Gulf by the Bush administration is viewed by most Saudis as a gross invasion of their sovereignty and bound to bring chaos as it has in Iraq. The US administration may feel that it still supports the oil for security paradigm of US-Saudi relations. However, one can strongly doubt that the Saudi leadership feels this to be the case. They view the US intervention in Iraq as a major disaster to the region and a major victory for the Iranians. The oil for security paradigm has become a canard at least from from the Saudi point of view.

The Saudis may feel that if push comes to shove they could have support from a US administration desperate for access to oil, but they feel that Congress is totally turned against them for reasons that have more to do with AIPAC than with events on the ground in Saudi Arabia. Today the Saudis, including the Royal Family do not feel that they have serious support from the US and are acting accordingly.

Why have not factional divisions within the royal family emerged to a sufficient degree to destabilize the regime?

As shown earlier in the socio-political structure of the kingdom, the Royal Family may seem to have some divisions. However, they are very united when it comes to staying in power. Prince Naif's support of the conservative is a way for the senior princes to get the Salafis to accept the adjudication of disputes between the Salafis and the other groups. He is their understanding friend. King Abdullah is the friendly ear to the merchants and the civil service, etc. The senior princes are ultimately totally united. In fact, even if Abdullah died, one could expect that the next king would follow the same type of general policies, with one prince seen as open to the Salafis and another to the liberals, etc. The next king may not have the charisma of Abdullah and find imposing his views more difficult, but he will manage the problems in the same manner.

What is the relationship between the monarchy and religious institutions and coercive institutions that maintains stability?

The monarchy is keenly aware that it is the heir to AbdelWahab. However, the religious establishment is now bigger than just the Wahhabi movement. As explained earlier, the Sahwa now holds the religious power and has taken hold of many institutions in the Kingdom. It controls the educational system, the courts, has a strong presence in many ministries, etc. However, the monarchy has managed to keep the Sahwa in check until now. Thanks to the extreme violence pruned by the extremist fringes of the Sahwa movement, it has lost a lot of credibility in the public. The monarchy has been very clever in not imposing an enormous coercive apparatus upon the Sahwa. It has established re-education centers in lieu of the traditional prison and torture centers. It tries to re-incorporate the lost but repentant sheep into society with jobs and money. It has had some success avoiding creating martyrs of the extremists and made martyrs of the extremists' victims. Hence coercion exists, but is relatively minimal. Altogether, stability is maintained as much by co-optation as by coercion.

What is the intellectual rationale for maintaining the status quo in an era when democracy as an idea seems to be gaining universal support? Is part of the rationale the fear – real or invented – of “radicals” coming to power in the event of real elections or democratization more generally?

One has to challenge the statement that democracy is gaining universal support when it comes to the Gulf countries. Democracy is still very puzzling to most Gulf citizens. It is undoubtedly totally foreign to most Saudis. The only two countries in the region with an

approximation of democracy in the region are Kuwait and Iran, both of them seen as dysfunctional. Our democratic ally in the Middle East, Israel, is viewed in the Gulf as a military state imposing its will upon hapless Palestinians. Efforts to bring democracy to Iraq are seen as being another form of Naqba imposed upon the people of Iraq. Hence, the monarchy does not have to wave the fear of extremism very much to be seen as the better option, among liberals and conservatives equally.

What is the structure and strength of forces in society that seek either abolition of the monarchy or its transformation into a democratic, constitutional status?

Except for the Jihadist, there seem to be no substantial movement asking for abolition of the monarchy. Everyone wants the government to be more responsive, the judiciary more educated, the princes to be less corrupt and the economy to benefit more Saudis. However, there are not organized group calling for an abolition of the monarchy. Every petition to the King starts with a lengthy statement of allegiance to the system.

How does the regime relate to these various oppositional forces?

The diagram presented earlier shows that the monarchy and the major princes behind it make sure that they are the only adjudicators of disputes in the country. The monarchy will adjudicate sometimes in favor of the civil service, sometimes in favor of the Salafis. It will always seek to make sure the groups do not get along well. The King and his senior princes will ensure that within each groups there are dissension and arbitrate within the groups. The civil service presently is divided between the proponents of a very active private sector and the proponents of giving the economic leadership the state companies like Saudi Aramco and SABIC. Among the Sahwa, the government can play the divide between the Akhwan and the traditional Wahabi, insuring that none become overly dominant. Altogether, the policy is divide, conquer, co-opt and in the last resort apply coerce.

Conclusion

The Kingdom appears to move towards what Dahl called an “inclusive hegemony”, but certainly not towards democratization. The monarchy is not about to increase the political and social liberalization, which in Dahl’s diagram is needed to work with increased participation to lead to democracy. The Saudi regime may not be aware of Dahl’s paradigm, but it is well aware that liberalization of the press, the development of political parties, free elections if

linked to increase participation will inexorably lead to an Iraqi type chaos. Further, it has sold this fear to its own public, with the great help of the failures of the US in the region and the examples of dysfunctionality in Iran and Kuwait. The senior princes of the royal family, which are at the core of the system may be seen as corrupt and in many cases as mere leeches on the society, but they are also viewed as the the guarantors of peace and stability.