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Middle East Flashpoint

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies
University of Peloponnese

No 52

1 December 2013

Does Saudi society speak up?

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Saudi Arabia's society is one of the most insular societies worldwide, appearing "immune" to the Arab awakening that swept away some of the authoritarian regimes in the MENA region and changed a number of others. However, the Kingdom now faces numerous social, political, economic and religious challenges, which must be dealt with wisely by the Royal family, as the society's awareness regarding its rights is growing.

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Although Arab states are among the most authoritarian states worldwide, the Saudi regime cannot be placed in the same category as any other state in the Middle East and North Africa region, given that it is not a simple centralized system with a president for life. Saudi Arabia -whose written charter is the Koran and has its political and social roots in Wahhabism and its strict interpretation of Islam via Sharia law-, has its own political order, determined by the elderly group of brothers who have ruled Saudi Arabia since 1953. In other words, Al Saud dynasty holds the exclusive monopoly of power, while political parties and any opposition voice are banned inside the country. The notions of democracy, freedom of thought and expression and respect for human rights are unknown in the Kingdom.

Until recently, the royal family that has built its power on the oil and hydrocarbon reserves of the country, as well as on its role as the custodian of the birthplace of Islam, appeared “immune” from the revolts in the Arab World. However, Saudis began to demand more respect to their wishes. “Immune”, but mindful of the political and social Arab awakening, Riyadh seemingly adopted a series of reforms in order to meet the challenging demands of its own people. Riyadh tried to overcome its difficulties created by the growing demand for respect of basic human rights and freedoms, the high unemployment rate of Saudi Arabia’s youthful population as well as tensions regarding the interpretation of Islam, between conservative and progressive groups and the dispute with the Shia minority.

To begin with, Saudi Arabia fails to provide for protection of basic liberties, and has yet to ratify core international human rights instruments. In addition, the existing legislation is based on the regime’s interpretation of Sharia law, the application of which, according to article 55 of the Basic Law of Governance, is overseen by the King, while the Saudi Human Rights Commission and the National Society for Human Rights, both governmental bodies, are the only human rights organizations tolerated in the Kingdom. Human rights society is rather controlled and consequently underdeveloped, serving the interests of the numerous members of the royal family under the pretext of ensuring social and ideological order. The best example is the refusal of Saudi officials to register human rights groups, leaving their members subjected to criminal prosecution for setting up an unregistered organization. The Adala Center for Human Rights is probably the most characteristic example. In December 2011, the Social Affairs Ministry rejected the application of the Adala Center, and since then the organization has started a long litigation process against the resolution of the ministry on principles of international human rights law. Many are also the cases of individual human rights activists who dared to oppose the strict royal rules and were convicted by the authorities for “attempting to distort the reputation of the Kingdom”. Mohammed al-Bajadi, Mohammed al-Qahtani, Waleed Abu al-Khair and Abdullah al-Hamid are just a few of those who have faced heavy imprisonment sentences, most of the times in secret trials¹, while on 13 March 2013 seven activists of Saudi nationality were executed. The activists were convicted of crimes which did not fall into the category of “the most serious crimes”, after problematic trials and after allegations they had been subjected to torture and other ill treatment while in detention and were forced to sign confessions.

Of particular interest are women rights in the sex-segregated Saudi society. Although Saudi Arabia signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women on September 7th 2000, even with severe reservations, women’s fundamental rights are still not recognized. The implementation of international basic human rights obligations is absent in the Kingdom and traps women in rather humiliating living conditions. Women’s rights in Saudi Arabia are strictly linked to the interpretation of Islam, and therefore to male guardianship that passes from male to male (father, brother, husband or even son rendering women something more than merchandise). Barred from

participating in the only municipal elections in the history of the country in 2005, and prohibited from studying certain subjects at schools, women in Saudi Arabia have a long way ahead towards gender equality.

Mindful, or even afraid, of the turmoil in the Arab world, King Abdullah tried to pour oil on troubled waters by adopting some innovative reforms promoting women's rights. King Abdullah has inaugurated a series of reforms in favor of women. On August 30th 2013, Saudi Arabia approved a law to protect women, children and domestic workers from abuse. Under the law, the first of its kind in the conservative kingdom, anyone found guilty of committing physical or psychological abuse will face a sentence of as much as a year in prison, while previously domestic violence was treated under a general penal code based on Islamic law². The encouragement to attend secondary and tertiary education and the permission of women athletes to participate for the first time in the Olympic Games last year stands out as one impressive achievement. Women will also be able to vote and run for public office in the 2015 local government elections³, while their employment opportunities are expected to increase. The case of Arwa al-Hujaili, a legal trainee, graduate of King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, licensed from the Ministry of Justice on April 8th 2013, who after a three-year apprenticeship, will become a fully licensed lawyer⁴ is a hopeful development. However, the most important step until now, as far as women's advancement is concerned, is King Abdullah's decision to swear in 30 women to the previously all-male Shura advisory council⁵. But in a society like the Saudi one, these gestures are more symbolic than substantive, since a possible change in the social and political status quo and power, via the respect of the rights of Saudi citizens and their active participation in the political and social life of the country, could mark a new era for the Kingdom, not in favor of the regime.

Serving as a confirmation for the superficial character of these reforms, a codified penal code is still absent, while a code criminalizing violence, including sex violence, against women is lacking, leaving the interpretation of Sharia to the courts and the Council of Senior Religious Scholars appointed by the King. The authorities' reaction to Saudis women driving campaign on 26 October 2013 has strengthened the conviction that Saudi women are still far from being able to participate in society on an equal basis with men. The conservatives inside the Kingdom were angered when around 60 women claimed they got behind the wheel in order to oppose the driving ban. Apart from the sanctions on some of the women participants, Saudi police detained an activist and newspaper columnist for the London-based Arabic newspaper Asharq al-Awsat, Tariq al-Mubarak, who made the mistake to support the campaign. The activist, whose profession is a secondary school teacher, remains in detention, banned from family visits and legal counsel⁶. Considering the above, Saudi Arabia's participation in the UN Human Rights Council is rather ironic, as Riyadh refuses to respect its own population's basic rights.

The increasing number of the jobless youthful population is an additional pressing issue in Saudi society. Today, 51% of the population of Saudi Arabia is under the age of 25 and the unofficial unemployment rate is reaching 30%. Young Saudis are anxious about their employment prospects, a concern that becomes more pressing taking into consideration that 80% of the Kingdom's labor force is migrant workers⁷. The Arab awakening made young Saudis think about their future and realize that they have a lot in common with the youth in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the MENA region. Consequently, they began to express criticism on their "lost" aspirations. Under these circumstances, the Royal family has tried to free up jobs for its own citizens during the past few years by means of a series of reforms. However, despite the efforts to reduce unemployment by introducing economic reforms, jobs posts were mostly created for expatriates. In an effort to stop the

influx of foreign workers, the Saudi government has imposed fines and restrictions on companies that fail to meet the quotas for local hires. Moreover, the government has introduced a levy of 2,400 riyals for each foreign worker employed by a company over the number of Saudi nationals. At the same time, Riyadh has started an unprecedented crackdown on illegal labor and on expatriates who are working for a different company than that listed on their residence visa or are employed in a different professional field, a fact to which for years the Kingdom has turned a blind eye.

Finally, a great challenge for Saudi government is its strained relations with the Shia minority, which faces systematic discrimination. Shia rituals and religious books are forbidden in the country, and phenomena of discrimination against Shia citizens are common, while they are marginalized from Saudi social and cultural life, security sectors and political offices⁹. On a number of occasions, the Sunni-Shia conflict has broken out into violence during the last two decades. Since the early 2011, hundreds of the Shia community who, struggling for their religious, sociopolitical rights, have been arrested and detained only on suspicion of taking part in or supporting demonstrations against the regime, while others were shot dead. Nor are the efforts of reconciliation between Sunnis and Shi'ites tolerated in the Kingdom, as the monolithic religious order on society imposed from above is deemed necessary for the survival of the Saudi regime. Mikhif al-Shammari, an activist, was sentenced to five years in prison because of efforts to foster relations between Sunni and Shia Saudis⁹. The strained relations with the Shia minority in combination with the conflict between the supporters of the conservative approach of Islam and those who are moderate and want a less oppressive interpretation of the religion were exacerbated during the Arab Awakening.

Subtle changes in the Saudi Kingdom create questions on whether the society will take to the streets, or remain stuck to the conformity with the status quo. Despite social problems, questions of discrimination and rising unemployment, Saudis do not seem to push for extensive reforms, even though the youth face unemployment. The creation of a human rights culture in the country could provide a brighter future for the society against a regime that follows a backward-looking model.

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