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2005

Muhammad Haniff Hassan. (2005). Saudi Arabia after Fahd : prospects for change and reform. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 055). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/91968>

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SAUDI ARABIA AFTER FAHD: PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE AND REFORM

Muhammad Haniff Hassan *

16 August 2005

WHEN King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995 that incapacitated him, the day-to-day running of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia passed to his half-brother, Crown Prince Abdullah. Many observers and political leaders had speculated on what would happen to the country should the King pass on. Instability in Saudi Arabia has been a matter of grave concern to many, especially in view of its possible impact on the price of oil, which was already high, and on the war against terrorism.

But the August 1 demise of King Fahd has not been accompanied by any upheaval. The smooth transition is encouraging. The appearance of unity is vital as it helps to prevent instability caused by internal power struggles, which can especially arise should there be a power vacuum.

Competing forces

It is unlikely that major policy changes will occur in the immediate future under the new monarch. Nevertheless, King Abdullah is expected to carefully manage the potentially destabilising internal dynamics caused by the competition between the conservative forces, predominated by the *ulama*, and the liberal forces who seek to reform Saudi society to make it more in step with some of the neighbouring Gulf states.

It is safe to predict that in the first few years of King Abdullah's rule, Saudi Arabia will continue to maintain its conservatism in social, cultural and religious life. Major changes are unlikely but to please the liberals, minor adjustments in policy can be expected. This is primarily because the government requires the support of the *ulama* and their conservative allies to fight extremism within Saudi society which is threatening not only the security of the country but also the monarchy itself.

For the time being appeasing the conservative forces is paramount to King Abdullah's rule. He needs to reduce the likelihood of the conservatives veering in support of the extremists. The extremists have engaged in a global jihad in many parts of the world, including Iraq, but more ominously, Saudi Arabia has witnessed acts of domestic terrorism perpetrated by religiously-motivated youths. As such, the battle of ideas against extremism and terrorism in Saudi Arabia will last for a significant number of years. Whether the new king will manage to reintegrate the extremists into Saudi society will largely influence the power dynamics in the country.

Invariably, this will involve an ideological battle between the state and the Salafi/Wahhabi version of Islam sanctioned by the Saudi government. The Wahhabi interpretation of the faith is at the core of Saudi conservatism and is widely accused of being the source of intolerance and radicalism. There have been pressures on the Saudi government to embark on some form of ideological reform in the kingdom. But it is unlikely that such pressures will have a significant impact on Saudi Arabia's domestic conservative policies, especially in this time of transition. The kingdom is able to resist external pressures because it still holds a powerful bargaining chip -- oil. With the world economy in its current state, the price of oil is more vital than ever. It is unlikely that the West would do anything to worsen the situation.

Political Reform

Under the new king, ongoing reforms are expected to proceed on the political front. The current liberalisation, such as the holding of local municipal elections, will continue. It is important to note that significant quarters of conservative elements are also demanding from the government some form of political liberalisation to allow public participation in policy-making -- in line with the spirit of *syura* (consultation) in Islam. More such initiatives can also be expected -- so long as they do not challenge the fundamentals of the government's conservatism. This can be seen from the petition initiated by the *ulama* to King Fahd in the mid 1990s, which partly caused the arrest of many *ulama*, among them Salman Al-Audah and Safar Al-Hawali.

Nevertheless, the political liberalisation embarked by the Saudi government will not fundamentally alter the existing system. Rather, its main objective is to implement a consultative and participatory system within the existing order. Political participation will be limited to local administrations; the appointment of office bearers for important institutions, which determine the policy and direction of the country, will still be based on appointment by royal decree. It is expected that this will be to the common interest of the rival factions within the Saud family members who dominate the government.

It remains to be seen however if the limited reforms will be accepted by the wider population; will they create lasting stability or will they spark demands for even greater reform? Either way it is important that the initiatives be encouraged and Saudi citizens take full advantage of this opportunity. They should also strive to keep the momentum going for more initiatives.

In this critical period of transition, pro-reform activists might be tempted to exploit the situation for more radical or extreme measures, such as embarking on subversive activities. One can expect, however, the extremists amongst them to attempt to step up the number of attacks or launch spectacular raids, or even a revolution to destabilise the nation. This will be a tragic mistake. The Saudi government's determination to act against any opposition and its will to respond should not be underestimated. Furthermore, such extreme moves will be counter-productive and will almost certainly set back current efforts at political liberalisation.

Evolutionary Change

Any political and social reform in Saudi Arabia should be based on the principle of evolutionary, not revolutionary change. This principle is not only a realistic and practical way to effect changes but is also evident in the teachings of Islam as practised by the Saudis.

Pro-reform movements in Saudi Arabia should be mindful that Islam's enjoinder of peace

should also be manifested in their political action. Pro-reform movements must be committed to peaceful and non-violent means for reform and changes. They should not think that the evolutionary approach and peaceful means are signs of weakness and would therefore be ineffective in bringing about social and political changes. Modern history provides several examples of the power of non-violent movements in the face of entrenched authoritarian governments. The People's Power revolt which brought down Marcos in the Philippines is one. Yet another example is Tayyeb Erdogan, known for his Islamist bent, who became prime minister of Turkey inspite of the extreme secularists in the military.

From the Islamic perspective, ulama do not encourage armed resistance against the government, as it often causes bloodshed and damage. Contemporary experiences of armed resistance against the government have so far not been any different.

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