



Review Paper

Saudi Monarchy and the Arab Spring: A Way Forward to the Question of Stability

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Abstract

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia almost remained problem free although the Arab Spring replaced the autocratic regimes in the Arab States of North Africa. The monarch of Saudi Arabia derives the legitimacy from the large oil revenue especially after the oil boom, along with the religious authority derived as custodian of the two holy mosques (Mecca and Medina) and through tribal affiliation. Therefore this paper will examine the strategies undertaken by ruling family of Saudi Arabia to prevent any kind of trouble created by the advent of the Arab Spring. Saudi rulers used the cultural, institutional, and the sectarian approach through which it was able to contain the effect of the Arab Spring in the Kingdom.

Keywords: Saudi, Monarchy, Arab Spring, Way, Forward, Question, Stability.

Introduction

Saudi Arabia remained almost untouched by the effects of the Arab uprising while it has replaced the autocratic regimes in the Arab States of North Africa. Saudi Arabia with a comparatively small population is a rich oil producing country in the world. Since the discovery of oil, the Saudi being a rentier state used its huge oil income to gain loyalty to the ruling family. This paper will go in details to examine how the Saudi ruling family which is ruling the Saudi state since 1932 was able to avert the tensions created by the advent of Arab Spring on the shores of Saudi Arabia¹. It is generally debated that Saudi monarch was able to contain the effect of the Arab Spring in the Kingdom through various means and approaches. One of the most important approaches which uphold the Arab monarchies through traditional tribal and religious legitimacy is the cultural approach, which also induces loyalty and support from its citizens. Whereas the institutional approach argues that monarchs organizationally is above day to day politics of the country and they can amicably interfere in the working of system to lead controlled reforms which can resolve public dissatisfaction². Saudi monarch has also developed a framework of 'coup-proofing' to protect itself from any kind of coup³. Another approach adopted by the Saudi regime in response to the Arab uprising in the region is sectarian approach. This approach was adopted by the Saudi regime as a strategy to counter the revolutionary tides reaching the shores of Saudi Arabia. Through sectarianism the Saudi regime was able to amplify religious tension among its citizens to prevent unity among the different sects. The main purpose of sectarian approach is to create a fault line between the Shia and Sunni so that they are unable to come to a single platform for political mobilization of masses⁴.

When Arab spring started spreading all over the Arab world the Saudi authorities had used two fold strategies to crush the Arab Spring because of the fear of its impact on Saudi Arabia. First, Saudi Arabia started playing very influential role in the outcome of the Arab Spring in the countries like Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Bahrain and in their own favour because the authorities in the Saudi Arabia were very much aware that the outcome will be having adverse impact on Saudi Arabia's politics and society. Domestically the Saudi authorities use various strategies like use of religion, coup-proofing, petro-dollar and sectarian divide to crush the impact of Arab Spring. The Saudi regime used Wahabi religious interpretation particularly on sectarian issues against the Shia minority, as they were politically active⁵ and in order to constrain any development taking place at national level that surpasses the regional, sectarian, tribal and ideological boundaries.

Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring

Unlike many other states across the region, Saudi Arabia did not endure prolonged unrest. This lack of unrest was regardless of large unemployment among the young Saudis (mostly between the ages of 20 and 24) which stood at 40% approximately at that time⁶. Saudi Arabia faces several other serious challenges, notably concerning political participation and the question of succession. In spite of the tensions within the Kingdom, the Saudi population did not follow the lead of other West Asian countries. A Facebook page publicising the call for a 'Day of Rage' on 11 March 2011, across the Saudi Arabia attracted 36,000 people to the event. But on the pre-decided day just a single individual, a 40 year old teacher Khaled al- Johani, came to protest in Riyadh where he was arrested⁷. The following six demands were raised on the Facebook page created for the 'Day

of Rage': i. Calls for an elected Shura council to replace the consultative body appointed by the King; ii. An independent judiciary; iii. The release of all political prisoners; iv. The right to exercise freedom of expression and assembly; v. The abolition of all duties and taxes; vi. The implementation of a minimum wage⁸.

The above mentioned demands demonstrate the burgeoning frustration within Saudi Arabia at economic problems and restrictions placed on political space. These demands displayed many of the similar demands that were uttered and raised during the Arab Spring, because of democratic pressures and economic concerns. The reason for low turnout on the 'Day of Rage' was due the fear of security forces, whose presence was large; however, in addition to this fear, there exists a framework often employed by the Al Saud at times of crisis to prevent the emergence of threats, building upon notions of 'coup-proofing'⁹. This framework maintains the security of the Al Saud's rule, preventing the emergence of strong opposition groups.

Understanding the Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia

Legitimacy in its basic form means the acceptance of authority by the general public¹⁰. In the majority of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, citizens conceive monarchy as a political system¹¹. High degree of legitimacy is still enjoyed by the Arab kings because of the approval of the monarchy as an institution by their citizens¹².

The legitimacy is also derived by the Saudi monarch from religious authority as the custodian of two holy mosques of Islam situated in Mecca and Medina. The absolute power of king is established by the interpretation of the Quran and Sharia, the status of the king is defended by the interpretation of Wahhabi clerics.¹³ The Saudi state is based on mono religious and cultural identity adopted by the ruling family in line with the ultraconservative Wahabi ideology and the planned marginalisation of Shia minority¹⁴.

One of the most determining factors for gaining legitimacy for the monarch in the Saudi Arabia is its tribal affiliation. Tribalism seeks to fuse the Al Saud's identity with that of nationalist identities and religious identities. It also secures the Al Saud's legitimacy within the Kingdom through delegitimising the identities of opponents, which is achieved through a process of detribalisation. Al Saud sought to demonstrate that opposition to the ruling elite was also opposition to the state. Nevo suggests that an additional strategy was to use religion as a way of consolidating a "Saudi national identity which in turn will constitute an additional attribute for the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty"¹⁵. Tribalism still remains an important legitimising tool for the Saudi rulers.

The Impact of Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia through the lens of Social and Institutional Approach: The employment

of military and force has been referred to as "coup-proofing", which James Quinlivan refer to as "the set of actions a regime takes to prevent a military coup"¹⁶. The nature of state-formation within Saudi Arabia has left a framework of methods that are used by the Al Saud to secure the regime. However, in light of the events that got unfolded during the Arab Spring and the nature of the geopolitical environment, wherein Saudi Arabia is challenged by Iran on several issues, another technique which has been employed is that of calling the effects of the Arab uprising as a consequence of external influence¹⁷.

One such a way, the framework has been developed that can be witnessed in the regulation of online space, which despite initially offering scope for political discussion has become increasingly censored. This is demonstrated by several arrests of people who posed the question of who was to succeed Abdullah as king of Saudi Arabia. In August 2010 Blackberry mobile phone usage was limited due to the inability of Saudi intelligence agencies to crack encryption codes used in the devices. The fear within Riyadh was that protestors could use Blackberry devices to coordinate action, leaving the police and government forces impotent¹⁸. Within the Saudi Arabian legal system there is no criminal code; rather, law is based upon an uncodified version of the Sharia. Indeed, under this draft of anti-terror legislation even a peaceful act of dissent can be labeled as crime of a terrorist¹⁹.

The new anti-terror laws place further restrictions on freedom of speech and expression, and wide interpretations assigned to the term of 'terrorist crimes' and 'terrorism' leaves space for misuse by the law enforcing agencies. Further, the notion of shaking an individual's confidence in the state, King or Crown Prince leaves little scope for discussing the nature of the regime. Moreover, given the broad definition of terrorist crimes, holding peaceful political meetings falls within the definition of a terrorist crime. Again demonstrating the regime's concern over the uncensored debate occurring on the Internet is the Saudi monarch's attempt to improve the censorship of the internet content within the Saudi Kingdom. In attempt to censor the contents of the electronic media, Ministry for Culture and Information asked all bloggers to get a license, where individuals above the age of 20 and having a college degree can only apply for a license²⁰. Various amendments were brought which bans insulting members of religious establishments and government and again stress the importance of maintaining the reputation of the Al Saud²¹.

The Saudi state which is a rentier state provides the ruler with huge amount of economic resources at its disposal without taxing the citizens. Therefore soon after returning to Saudi Arabia after recuperating from back surgery, The Saudi king announced a welfare reform package of USD 36 billion, with a promise of additional USD 94 billion in the coming years. Whilst a large percentage of this money was to facilitate the building of five hundred thousand new homes, the remaining amount to be spent on the increments to the pay of workers in

the public sector, and to subsidised education and welfare measures. Indeed, there was also a one-time bonus for state employees constituting the equivalent of two months' wages²². Abdullah's package of welfare reforms sought to calm down the effects of Arab Spring on the masses and to prevent issues especially economic which can lead to protest across the Kingdom. Given the nature of the Arab Spring, combing economic concerns with political aspirations, this strategy appears wise. Scholars often cite the resource as a problem, oil in particular is a curse for the Saudi populace which hinders the chances of democratization²³. Moreover, citizens of the GCC states pay no tax, and their citizens are entitled to receive free housing, healthcare, and education. Most of the GCC states have small populations and only minorities of them are citizens.

Arab Spring and the Sectarian Approach in Saudi Arabia

The problem of sectarian divisions among the populace of the Arab states emerged as the most important fault line that affected the outcome of the Arab Spring as it sharply divided people toward state machinery. Sectarian division creates the critical societal split among Shia and Sunni populations in the Arab monarchies. The immigrant workers or the foreign nationals have very different sets of priority as most of them are from under developed or developing countries, who all want to continue with their jobs and residency status are not enough enthusiastic to participate in the protest²⁴.

This competition among the various monarchies can be seen within the events of the Arab Spring, notably in Bahrain and Syria²⁵. Fearing that the Al Khalifa family would fall and that Shia groups (and thus Iran) would make substantial gains within the state, the Al Saud offered support for the ruling elite, sending troops to Bahrain to strengthen the regime. John Bradley has referred to Saudi Arabia's role fighting the uprisings of the Arab Spring as offering a "guiding hand - and often an iron fist",²⁶ demonstrated by the speed and nature of the Saudi response to political upheaval in Bahrain. However, the Al Saud is also seeking to prevent the emergence of prodemocracy movements and any increase in Iranian power.

Conclusion

As the protest during the Arab Spring in 2011 replaced many previously well established autocratic regimes in Arab world, its impact on the Saudi kingdom remained marginal in the larger context. The advent of the Arab Spring to the shores of Saudi Arabia led to generally small demonstrations; demands from the protesters were reform and not revolution. Protesters in Saudi Arabia did not raise questions regarding the kingdom's political and economic settings. Rather, they asked for political and socio-economic reforms and freedom in matters pertaining to the establishment of civil societies and non-governmental organizations. They also demanded freedom of speech and expression along with the removal of some of the corrupt and inefficient ministers.

The framework used by the Saudi government to prevent the emergence of these opposition movements has worked. The different nature and degree of these protests can be well explained by different level support for the regimes, religious-cultural, societal divide, and political-cultural aspects. The response of the Saudi monarchy to these challenges, dependent upon their economic largesse and applied political approaches.²⁷ For Saudi Arabia its Shia minority are most potential opposition, which is small and not well organized. However, the application of the defensive framework of coup-proofing cannot be successfully applied to the challenges and threats arising from non-military actors. The economic pressures and demands for greater political participation are mounting upon the government from its citizens. Therefore all the recent happening in the kingdom suggests that there is much felt need for the Saudi state to open up to strike a balance between demands for better opportunities for political participation, greater individual rights and the stability and support for the ruling family.

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