RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Kamel ALBOAOUH
Colorado School of Mines
alboaouh@mymail.mines.edu

Jon MAHONEY
Ph.D., Associate Professor of Philosophy, Kansas State University
jmahoney@ksu.edu

Abstract

Alfred Stepan's "twin-tolerations" thesis (2000) is a model for explaining different ways that religious and political authority come to be reconciled. In this paper, we investigate some obstacles and challenges to realizing a reconciliation between religious and political authority in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) that might result in a transition away from a theocratic monarchy to a more consultative form of political authority. Whereas most analyses of religion and politics in KSA focus on geopolitics, the rentier state model, or economic and military aid from the United States, we also consider local factors that emphasize the agency of political and non-political actors within KSA, focusing on examples such as education policy and how this is a barrier to political reform. Our position is not meant to replace the standard models, but rather to supplement them by offering a multi-variable perspective on the challenges and prospects for meaningful political reform in KSA.

Keywords: Twin-Tolerations, Education Reform, Rentier State Politics, Economic Reform, Absolute Monarchy, Democracy, Political Islam.

Introduction

There are many excellent studies that examine why oil rich Muslim majority states are generally undemocratic and authoritarian. One prevailing model (Davidson, 2012, Ross, 2012) emphasizes the correlation between oil resources as a percentage of GDP and authoritarian politics. Since this correlation obtains whether a state is Muslim majority or not (Ross, 2012), the rentier-state model is a useful corrective to the popular yet false assumption that Islam is the primary reason so many Muslim majority states are authoritarian. Other studies emphasize how the global market for natural resources incentivizes authoritarian politics in resource rich states (Wenar, 2015). Moreover, in the case of KSA, the United States has been on the side of the House of Saud for nearly a century and this is a relevant geopolitical perspective (Vitalis, 2007). One drawback with these approaches is their tendency to place too little emphasis on the agency of local actors. Politics is not merely a chessboard on which the great powers push around weak states. Partly for this reason, a

bottom-up approach to religion and politics that emphasizes ways that local custom and different interpretations of religious values is also important. If we want a more informed perspective we need to also consider this point of view (Bayat, 2013). Our hypothesis is that no one model captures all the relevant considerations that explain the challenges and prospects for reform in KSA. Rather, we need to consider why a state such as KSA is authoritarian using data from multiple models. One model that is especially helpful in the context of KSA is Stepan's idea of a "twin-toleration" (Stepan, 2000) between religious and political authority, a toleration that requires negotiation between power-brokers with divided allegiances between religious and political values. One feature to contemporary KSA that merits study in this context is education practices, in which some 40% of instruction in primary education is devoted to state-controlled religious instruction. This is an impediment to reform for many reasons, including the fact that science education takes a back seat to religious instruction. There is also too little emphasis on the importance of civil society and political values within the education system. The absence of a unified opposition is also serious factor. Opposition groups that favor authoritarianism is another. Though some opposition groups, both domestic and abroad, advocate meaningful programs for change within KSA, others favor the coercive enforcement of Sharia. Moreover, KSA is an effective police state with significant surveillance capacities and thus like many other authoritarian states can marshal resources to instill fear in those who want political reform. Our study will focus some ways that these intersecting factors both make change a real possibility while also counteracting the kinds of reform that are politically feasible.

The paper is organized as follows. First, in the **On Democracy** section we present the minimal institutional and political requirements for a country to be considered a democratic state. We will also explore the willingness of the KSA regime to transition to a democratic state. Second, in the **Saudi Education** section, we will examine the importance of education for achieving reform in the KSA. Thirdly, in the **On Religion** section, we will indicate the points of incompatibility between official KSA interpretations of Sharia law and democracy. Although the incompatibility between state enforced Sharia law and democracy is clear, the mainstream opposition in the KSA is demanding more rigorous implementation of Sharia law. This position does not leave open an alternative, such as the one defended by An-Na'im (2008) who claims that whether individuals live under Sharia has to be their choice as individuals and not a result of coercion by the state. Finally, we will propose some options that KSA can consider for achieving a reconciliation between its claim to political authority and the Islamic opposition.

On Democracy

Democratic institutions include legislative, executive and judicial entities. Stepan argues that there are three minimal conditions for achieving a reconciliation between political and religious authority under a democratic regime: (1) democratic institutions are only free to generate policies within the bounds of the Constitution and human rights; (2) the judgment of whether a party violates democratic principles should be decided by the courts, not by the executive, which in KSA is the monarch; and (3) government can impose constraints on religious political parties who violate democratic principles but only after such parties have been formed; imposing restrictions in advance is not consistent with a democratic rule of law, but rather, reflects the arbitrary authority of an executive without the relevant checks on power (Stepan, 2000, pp. 39-40). The minimal boundary of freedom of action on religious institutions is that they should not have constitutionally privileged prerogatives allowing them to mandate public policy against the consultative rights of those subject to law. In the ideal case the following will be upheld: (a) citizens have complete freedom to worship privately; (b) citizens must be able to advance their values publicly in civil society; (c) citizens must be able to sponsor organizations and movements in political society; (d) citizens must not violate the liberties of other citizens; (e) citizens must not violate democratic principles; (f) citizens actions must not violate the law; and (g) they must be able to form political parties without constraints (Stepan, 2000, pp 39-40).

Currently, KSA is quite far from these ideals. Democracy requires the state to tolerate the religious convictions of its citizens and also requires different religious groups to tolerate one another's beliefs. Both requirements are absent in the KSA. Unfortunately, official school textbooks and restrictive laws on speech in the KSA are fertile grounds for religious intolerance and sectarian conflicts. In this respect, the state itself plays an active role in inhibiting essential political reforms. There is one notable political limit to the monarchy's authority. The limited scope of parliamentary politics in KSA, as embodied in the Consultative Assembly, does result in a very limited power-sharing arrangement between these two authorities. In addition, the self-interest of the Royal family members limits the flexibility of the Saudi monarchy to shift toward a constitutional monarchy and to have an independent judicial power. Sadly, there is no pressure on the Saudi monarchy to adopt democratic values; intra-Royal family conflicts and the very limited power sharing arrangement with the Consultative Assembly fall well short of the threshold that would require political reforms in the direction of democracy. Therefore, we expect the KSA to

remain a state that continues sponsoring one religion, one official interpretation of that religion, and the persecution of religious minorities.

From a civil society perspective the picture is just as grim. On the one hand, a representative sample showed that 59% of Saudis think democracy is a good option. This indicates that there is majority support for democracy within the Saudi population. However, only 30% of the Saudi population also think democracy is about freedom, the rights of individuals and groups in political and civil life, while 34% think democracy is about equality and justice (DohaInstitute, 2014).

One qualification is in order here. The issue is not that KSA is a monarchy per se. Monarchies have played an important role in the evolution of democracy in many contexts. Moreover, there are many monarchial states in Europe that satisfy the conditions for being a democratic state, including Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. But these models of monarchy are not absolute; their power is severely limited, if not merely symbolic. In the case of the United Kingdom, starting in the 17th C various power-sharing schemes that gave more power to parliament began to take root. The conception of political authority defended by John Locke was one of the main contributors to this development (Rawls, 2000). In this context it is important to distinguish different forms of monarchy. Stepan, Linz and Minoves (2014) propose a threefold classification scheme: 1) ruling monarchy in which the monarchy can unilaterally form or terminate the government; 2) constitutional monarchy in which there is a power-sharing arraignment between parliament and monarch; and 3) democratic parliamentary monarchy in which only the freely elected parliament forms and terminates the government. KSA is an instance of 1), whereas modern European monarchies are instances of 3).

It is indisputable that KSA is an example of what Stepan, Linz, and Minoves call a ruling monarchy. For instance, the Saudi King has the unrestricted right to dismiss and assign ministers according to articles No. 57 and 58 of the KSA constitution. Even judges are assigned by the Saudi King - see article No. 52. In addition, article No. 44 gives the King supreme power over the judicial, executive and regulatory authorities. Consultative council members are selected and dismissed by the Saudi King – see article No. 68. In addition, article No. 69 gives the King the power to call whomever he wishes to the consultative council meetings and choose the topic of discussion. Article No. 74 gives indirect power to the Saudi King to sell, rent and control the asset of the state (The Shura Council, January, 2017).

Given the current political composition of KSA, the central question here is: how much of a transition towards democracy is the KSA willing to permit? Stepan et al (2014)

propose five variables as essential to the question of transition from ruling monarchy towards democracy. These are: (1) political pressure, (2) the monarchial family, (3) economy, (4) ethnicity, and (5) international actors. We will examine some of these factors.

A. Political Pressure

Stepan et al (2014) believe that without political pressure most ruling monarchies will not change. Absent extenuating circumstances, such as an economic crisis or war, ruling monarchies by nature will try to maintain their authority.

All forms of political opposition along with political parties are banned in the KSA. In spite of this, political opposition does exist, both domestically and internationally. In one sense it is not surprising that dissidents abroad will criticize the KSA regime; this is a common phenomenon across authoritarian states. Yet even these dissidents face significant risks. For instance, Naseer Al-Saeed, one of the oldest political opposition figures against the royal family, was kidnapped in 1979 in Lebanon after having been sentenced to death in 1956. For the most part, political opposition to the ruling monarchy have been demanding a move toward constitutional monarchy, although they have generally not provided a clear definition of constitutional monarchy. At the other end of the ideological perspective, some Islamic extremists, in particular Salafists, argue the ruling family betrayed its sacred duty by allowing westernization. One well-known source for contemporary Salafist movements is Sayyid Qutb (1964/2006) who opposed western secularism and materialism and argued that Islam can only flourish within a cultural context that mirrors that of early Islam. A key event that inspires this ideology is the 1991 Gulf War. Salafists believe that Saudi authorities compromised both the sovereignty of the country and the moral authority of the ruling Saud family by permitting U.S. forces on Saudi soil.

A third source of opposition in addition to those who favor constitutional monarchy and the Salafists is religious minorities. In KSA Islamic religious minorities face discrimination in employment and religious freedom, while non-Islamic minorities face a threat of death for heresy. Shiites form around 15% of the Saudi population and they are excluded from high-status jobs, such as ministers. Shiites are also forced to study Sunni Islam in schools. All other minorities – Jews, Christians, atheists, etc. – are completely unrecognized by the state; they are banned from expressing their faith, and even face a threat of punishment by death. Given this high degree of religious oppression, it is not surprising that Shiites went on strike in 1953, 1956, 1970, 1979 and 2011. Social science data tells us that we can expect an increase in inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflict when the levels of

state sponsored religious repression are high (Grim and Finke, 2010). Although a rentier-state can mitigate discontent to some extent, for instance by creating a patronage system that incentivizes loyalty to the regime through the distribution of oil revenues, there are limits to what an authoritarian state can do to its religious minorities before conflict breaks out.

An important part of the politics of religious repression in KSA is The Council of Senior Scholars (CSS). The main mission of the CSS is to generate Fatwa, which means the official Islamic opinion concerning specific events, occasions or circumstances. In practice, sometimes the CSS helps the state to halt political opposition by generating Fatwas with the aim of diffusing conflict and achieving political stability. For instance, in April 2014, KSA enacted a new law that considers, "calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based" a terrorist act (Whitnall, 2014). The political effect of this is that almost any criticism of the KSA can be construed as terrorism, since all laws in the KSA stem from Islamic faith (Whitnall, 2014). In other words, no distinction is made between criticizing Islam and criticizing the authority of the state. Unsurprisingly, Fatwas issued by CSS support the aforementioned law.

In 1991, a group of academics asked King Fahd to establish a Consultative Council. The Consultative Council was formed in 1993 as a consequence of the 1991 demands (Wehrey, 2015). Some in the political opposition were planning a coup. KSA hoped to avoid a fate similar to that of King Farouk who was overthrown in Egypt in 1952 by the Free Officers Movement. Arab nationalist ideologies influenced many military personnel and family ruling members during the 50s and 60s of the previous century. Arab nationalists attempted many military coups and although most failed such actions revealed vulnerabilities among authoritarian regimes in the region. A secret organization called Saudi Free Officers made a failed coup attempt in 1954. Also, in 1955, some tribes in the southwest of the KSA, who were supported by at least 12 officers, demanded greater religious rights, but the KSA dispatched Air Force planes to subdue rebellions. In 1962, four Saudi aircraft crews defected to Egypt. In 1969, the National Front for the Liberation of Saudi Arabia and the Federation of Democratic Forces in the Kingdom attempted another failed coup. In 1977, another coup was uncovered by Saudi authorities in Tabuk, a city in the northwest of the KSA (Kechichian, 2001). An extremist Islamic group led by Juhayman Al-Utaibi forced their way into Masjid Al-Haram, a holy Muslim place, for three weeks in late 1979 in an attempt to establish an Islamic Caliphate. In return, the KSA reduced the number of expatriate teachers and academics from Egypt to minimize the influence of Arab nationalism. In addition, as a strategy for competing with Arab nationalism, the KSA established the Muslim World League

in 1962 to alleviate the threat of Arab nationalists. KSA also weakened army forces corresponding to National Guards to curtail the threat of coups. However, Gulf wars in 1991 and 2003, Arab Spring and an Al-Houthi threat in Yemen started in 2009 forced the KSA into huge spending to build its military capabilities.

Finally, the Arab Spring was a significant factor in motivating political change in the KSA. In response, in February 2011, a series of benefits for Saudi citizens was announced amounting to $36 billion. $10.7 billion was assigned for housing. Moreover, in a twist of irony, the KSA declared 60,000 new security jobs as a counteraction to prevent the spread of the Arab Spring to the KSA (el-Tablawey, 2011). These are predictable moves by an authoritarian regime that knows it must change to survive. The decision strategy here is: make the changes to diffuse a threat, but keep the reforms to a minimum so that the identity of the regime remains authoritarian. As a result, the reforms in question are minimal.

B. The Royal Family

Stepan and coauthors examine the distinction between "*small hereditary monarchical families*" and "*large dynastic ruling families*" (Stepan et al, 2014). The former is more willing to accept a democratic transition than the later. The KSA royal family is an example of the later type of dynastic family. The royal family in the KSA is large clan called Al-Saud. Saud is the grandfather of the AL-Saud clan. The KSA is run by a branch of the Al-Saud clan all of whom are descendants of King Abdullaziz Albdullarahman Al-Saud. The exact number of Saudi princes is unknown. In his book *From Prince to King*, Alexander Bligh (1984) estimated the number of Saudi princes to be around 5,000. If that is an accurate estimate, we can reasonably infer that this number is considerably higher today. Another way of estimating the number of King Abdullaziz's descendants is by considering that Saud belongs to the first generation. The current King - King Salman – belongs to the eighth generation. The current crown prince – Muhammad Ibn Naif – belongs to the ninth generation. Excluding those who died at infancy, the sons of King Abdullaziz total 36 (Bligh, 1984). Each of King Abdullaziz's sons also have numerous sons.

Many studies discuss the problem of succession, yet this not a significant issue today. After the death of King Abdullaziz in 1953, there was no firm mechanism for succession. In 2007, King Abdullah formed The Allegiance Council. The members of The Allegiance Council are all from the royal family, and their mission is to assign, through voting, the crown prince once a new King came into power. In 2014, King Abdullah created a position called Deputy Crown Prince, who would eventually become a crown prince upon the King's death.

Today succession procedures in the KSA make the transition of power from monarch to monarch smooth and peaceful.

Unsurprisingly, Royal family members dominate sensitive positions in the KSA. For example, the Ministry of National Guards, Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Interior are all run by princes. Also, the KSA is divided into 13 administrative regions. The governor of each administrative region is from the royal family. Those sensitive positions make the Al-Saud family share the power of the KSA among them, which plays an additional role in controlling the King's decisions.

C. The Economy

Stepan and coauthors think a monarch that is struggling financially is a vulnerable monarch and more likely to share power with the population (Stepan et al, 2014). Conversely, a monarch with little or no need to collect taxes may well be able to fund security services and civic subsidies in amounts large enough to keep the peace and forestall any need to tolerate an elected legislature. Before 2016, the KSA wasn't collecting direct taxes – indirect taxes exist in two forms: as fees of imported goods and Zakat, which is an Islamic practice collecting 2.5% of overall assets. In this respect, KSA is a paradigm example of a rentier- state.

The KSA economy is mainly dependent upon oil and religious tourism. Oil accounts for 90% of KSA exports, 40% of GDP and 75% of the government's revenue (Goetz, 2003). If we study KSA as a rentier-state, we can assess the KSA's economy by studying the sustainability of oil and by overall governmental spending to subsidies, infrastructure, healthcare, etc. If oil is a significant sustainable source and governmental spending is constant or decreasing, KSA can engage is standard rentier-state politics: adopt generous tax policies and distribute enough wealth to the people to keep political grievances to a minimum.

The KSA claims to have a proven reserve of 266.58 billion barrels of crude oil (Alarabia Net, 2015). However, many energy analysts are skeptical about official declared numbers of oil reserves. Matthew R. Simmons (2006) in *Twilight in the Desert: The Coming Saudi Oil Shock and the World Economy* argues that the KSA overestimates its oil reserves. Simmons claims KSA has not announced the discovery of any major oil field since 1968, although the publicized number of oil reserves has increasing dramatically. It is difficult to forecast and study the sustainability of oil extraction because production data on oil wells stopped being reported in 1982. Until 1979 the KSA oil industry was run by U.S. companies which held accurate data for individual wells. The General Accounting Office (GAO) investigated KSA oil capabilities in 1978 and submitted their report to the Congress in the U.S. The GAO report says that the total

proven reserves in the KSA amount to 110 billion barrels. After 1979, the KSA took over the management of oil. Simmons notes that in 1979 the proven reserve declared by ARAMCO – an oil company owned by KSA- jumped to 150 billion barrels. Then, in 1982, the number jumped to 160 billion barrels. Then, in 1988, the number jumped to 260 billion barrels. Considering that KSA has been producing millions of barrels daily since the 1970s, the real numbers, though unknown, are most certainly considerably less than what the KSA regime claims. Simmons concludes with an ominous assessment: “Once the output of each key oilfield does start to decline from current levels, there is a reason to believe that the drop-off will be sudden and steep.” (Simmons, 2006, p. 263)

As a rentier-state KSA must face the fact of its depleting natural resource base. The KSA has many opportunities to enhance its economy, such as investing in mineral mining, research and development, diversifying its economy, liberalizing its economy, investing in tourism, encouraging and protecting direct foreign investment, etc. Yet it is obvious that there are significant limits to what KSA can achieve in these respects, unless it also adopts a program of significant political reform. In contrast to the Emirate states that have produced modern centers of capitalism and tourism, Dubai being a paradigm example, KSA has not undertaken the steps needed to incentivize the economic activities that can generate wealth from sources other than oil.

We conclude this section by noting the following challenges to reform:

1. **Corruption**. For instance, in 2000, total oil exports equaled $72 billion, but the government reported oil receipts equaling $57 billion. ARAMCO absorbed the difference, $15 billion, and the assumed excess went to royal family stipends. In addition, investment outside of the KSA by royal family members was estimated to be between $800 billion and $1 trillion that left the country without the benefits of those huge investments. Prince Bandar acknowledged in an interview that $50 billion out of $400 billion spent on modernizing the KSA since 1970 had been funneled off by corruption. His response was, “So what? We didn’t invent corruption.” (Goetz, 2003).

2. Demographics. The average population growth is about 3.67% per year, while GDP growth averaged 1.8% from 1998 to 2002. The projected population growth by 2020 is 40 million. According to The General Authority For Statistics in Saudi Arabia, if we compare the population in 2004 to 2007, we found that the population growth is 2.3%. According to a 2007 census, 32.5% of the Saudi population is under 15 years old, which now makes most of them of an age in which they are entering the workforce and marriage. Thus, with such a

relatively young population living in a rentier-state, the problem of unemployment is more likely to catastrophically impact human resources (General Authority For Statistics, 2016).

3. Water Resources. Average water consumption in the KSA is double the global average consumption, and the demand-growing rate per household is 7.5% annually (Tago, 2014). The required investment between 2003 and 2020 in water desalination is estimated to be $61.3 billion to meet future demand. The problem of water scarcity is more serious in the KSA due to the absence of rivers and lakes and low rainfall rate.

4. Direct Foreign Investment. Due to the relative absence of direct foreign investment in the KSA, employment opportunity in the private sector is low. Thus, most Saudis work for the government or for the army. Thus, 50% of the KSA government budget is dedicated to the payment of salaries alone (Mustafa, 2014). Any possible lack in KSA abilities to pay salaries is more likely to yield uncontrollable anger in the population. Foreign companies are wary of investing in the KSA because the regime owns more than half of the economy and a third of the stock exchange. If the KSA attracted foreign investments, it will lose much of its current revenue from direct ownership.

This data show that the current KSA regime must make significant changes if it hopes to offset the inevitable decline in oil rents.

D. International Pressure.

Research on the political economy of rentier-states demonstrates that authoritarian regimes that benefit from relations, economic and political, with non-authoritarian regimes, generally have little incentive to pursue a reform agenda (Wenar, 2015). This holds true across a range of regimes, from Obiang's dictatorship in Equatorial Guinea, a regime that profits from the extraction of resources freely bought and sold on the global market despite the fact that human rights abuses are widespread, to Kazakhstan which has been ruled by President Nazarbaev and his close associates since the fall of the USSR, the Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia. It is true that international pressure can harm a regime, as with the current sanctions against Russia by the West, which, along with low oil prices, have a significant negative impact on Russia's economy. Yet the political reality is that democratic states happily do business with authoritarian states, especially when the business is oil or some other vital natural resource.

Here is some relevant data that highlights KSA's dependency on the global economy. In 2011, exports by country were: Japan 13.9%, China 13.6%, U.S. 13.4%, S. Korea to South Korea 10.2%, and India 7.8%. For imports the data was, China 12.8%, U.S. 11.9% , Germany 7.1%, S. Korea 6% , Japan 5.6%, and India, 4.9% (Ramady, 2014).

KSA is also dependent on other states for its military hardware. For instance, between 2005 and 2009, there were over $18.7 billion potential U.S. arms sales to the KSA (Blanchard, 2009). In June 2004, a commercial transaction between the KSA and France equaled $12 billion dollars, including arms sales (Deutsche Welle, 2015). In 2010, the U.S. intended to perform military arms sales to the KSA equaling $60 billion (FRANCE24, 2010). Between 1950 and 2006, U.S. arms sales equaled $62.7 billion, and military construction services equaled $17.1 billion. Between 2005 and 2009, U.S. administration approved military sales equaling $16.7 billion (9/11 Commission, 2004).

Political reform in the KSA influenced by KSA-U.S. bilateral relationships may inspire the Islamic opposition. Cooperation with U.S. can be used by Islamists by invoking a tradition in Islam that opposes alliances with non-Muslim powers. In short, KSA-U.S. cooperation is at risk of serving as a recruitment tool for radical Islamists. Thus, KSA cooperation with the U.S. was limited to security issues, such as money laundering, tracking terrorists and tracking local Saudi extremists. Furthermore, even if the KSA were to embark on liberal reforms without international pressure, a risk of violent backlash by the Islamists against the regime increases (Zuhir, 2005). As Michael Walzer (2015) has shown in his study on Algeria, Israel, and India, attempts at liberal and secular political reforms by a state that is out of step with the background culture to which most citizens identify, is at risk of engendering a revival of religiously motivated political actors.

Education in Saudi Arabia

Education is essential to political reform because it plays a central role in shaping the views and beliefs of upcoming generations. We believe education in the KSA should promote the values of toleration, democratic principles, and critical thinking. Yet we are not so naïve as to think a Saudi version of Ataturk—who consulted with the democratic education reformer John Dewey in the early days of the Turkish Republic—will bring education practices in line with democracy anytime soon. Here we are stating a theoretical position, which will be followed by some data analysis of education practices in KSA.

If the youth believe in democratic principles and values of toleration, then the future of KSA would be more promising. There is some reason for optimism on this point in the Arab Spring States (Cole, 2014). By contrast, if Saudi youth believe that the authority of God over humans entails that theocracy is the only legitimate form of government, then KSA has a bleak future, especially for those KSA citizens who do not support theocracy. Ideally

education should be secular but we are fully aware that this is not a feasible option today. A brief look at current education practices shows why this is so.

Current education practice gives priority to theological over non-theological doctrine and this fact has enormous consequences for education in many areas including history, social studies, politics, and science education. This education philosophy engenders passivity and a dogmatic respect for the authority of approved religious figures (Pokrop, 2003). Article 13 in the KSA constitution emphasizes theologian power over schooling, which says, "education will aim at instilling the Islamic faith in the younger generation, providing its members with knowledge and skills and preparing them to become useful members in the building of their society, members who love their homeland and are proud of its history" (The Shura Council). One consequence of this is that 40% of the curriculum in public schools is dedicated to religious subjects (Pokrop, 2003). With so much emphasis on religious education, there is not a lot of room to improve education in other areas, including science, economics, law, and the social sciences.

After 9/11, KSA claimed it removed religious texts that preached intolerance (Allam, 2011). However, education reform is met with strong resistance. In addition, many critics believe that some reforms are symbolic and designed to placate democracy advocates abroad. For instance, a report prepared by Freedom House contradicts claims made repeatedly by senior Saudi government spokesmen that they have thoroughly revised their educational materials (Freedom House, 2006). In addition, during a visit of President Barack Obama to Saudi Arabia, a group of U.S. lawmakers staged a press conference to complain that Saudi textbooks – even after reform – still promoted hatred of non-Muslims (McEvers, 2009). These features of education in KSA provide one perspective on why reform is so difficult. Students are effectively inculcated into a state-controlled ideology that leaves no room for dissent or for views about Saudi society that diverge from a strictly controlled status quo.

On Religion

Some people assume that the unique or distinct conditions that were present at the birth of democracy within western civilization must be present in the KSA if we want to replicate democracy. A version of this view is defended by those who support, 'the clash of civilizations thesis' (Huntington, 1996). Conversely, Stepan (2000) and Kuru (2007) argue that we should focus on distinctive cultural resources in non-western contexts and look for ways that secular and democratic politics can emerge in these contexts. Against 'the clash of civilizations' position, these authors reject the idea that non-western religions are by essence

hegemonic and univocal. Rather, we should inquire whether non-western religious doctrines contain multivocal components that might inspire – or at least be compatible –with democratic reforms. On this view, there are multiple paths to democracy, not all of which follow the trajectory whereby western states became democratic after the American and French revolutions. We agree with this assessment and for that reason do not expect reform in KSA to follow the same path that led western monarchies to transform into democratic states. For this reason, we should focus on distinct features of the Saudi government and Saudi society.

The majority (59%) of Saudi Muslims think Islam is compatible with democratic values (Alsarhan, 2011). On the other hand, we may ask the following question, "Does Islam encourage people reject democratic values?" Here we need to be careful. When asked in the context of Muslims living in the U.S.A., Iran, Turkey, or Kyrgyzstan, citizens will likely express views that reflect not just their religious convictions, but also culture, tradition, and other factors that may be unique to one context (Esposito and Mogahed, 2007). In KSA, there is some evidence for a strong correlation between Saudis who identified as religious and Saudis who believe that democracy is not compatible with Islam. (Alsarhan, 2011). Another report by the Arab Center for Research and Political Studies reached the same conclusion: Saudis who identified as religious tended to reject democracy because they believed democracy contradicted their religious beliefs (DohaInstitute, 2014). In other contexts, we find different results. For instance, prominent Muslim public intellectuals in Europe and America, such as Tariq Ramadan (2008) and Abdullahi Amed An-Na'im (2008) defend the position that as a matter of core religious doctrine Islam and democracy are compatible. An-Na'im for example claims that in order to be an authentic Muslim he needs to live in a secular state that does not use law as a means to coerce citizens to profess a religious conviction.

What if any distinctive features to Saudi politics, society and religious identity might serve as the basis for political reforms that move towards the positions of Ramadan and An-Na'im? This question highlights a central roadblock to change in KSA. In KSA the dominant conception of political Sunni-Islam is understood by its adherents are incompatible with many democratic values. The following four points summarize major conflicts between democracy and the official political-religious identity supported by KSA:

1. In Saudi Arabia many eminent theologians interpret many Quranic verses to support God's legislative authority over humans, namely "Chapter 6: verse 57," "Chapter 5: verses 48-50," "Chapter 4: verses 65 and 105," "Chapter 12: verse 40," "Chapter 95: verse 8" and "Chapter 18: verse 26."

2. In Saudi Arabia, political Islam relies upon a consultative process to resolve legislative disputes that are beyond the scope of Holy texts. Apparently, this step looks compatible to democratic values, but its details are incompatible due to two reasons. First, the consultative entities do not include non-Muslims. This discriminates against non-Muslim citizens. Secondly, executive authority is not ultimately accountable to consultation because, in the KSA, the executive authority, or the King, holds the final legislative decision. In this way, contemporary KSA resembles historical models of theocratic monarchy, such as existed in Europe prior to the age of democratic revolutions.

3. The political-religious ideology in KSA supports the position that the monarch, or executive authority must rule on the basis of Sharia Law. Failure to do so would mean population must not obey even if disobedience means resistance to the state. Of course, KSA as with any monarchy will often make politically motivated decisions which it then tries to rationalize by invoking a ‘religious justification’. In that respect, KSA is like any other state or political authority that appeals to religion in order to promote an agenda. However, given the parameters set by religious-political ideology in KSA, the range of options for reform are quite limited.

4. As interpreted in KSA, Sharia Law is incompatible with basic human rights. This can be highlighted by four points: (a) there is no freedom of speech; (b) freedom of religion is not extended to Christians and Jews, and it is completely forbidden in the case of pagans and atheists; (c) laws clearly discriminate against non-Muslims and women; and (d) law inflicts cruel and unjust punishments and requirements, such as public executions, amputation, and the mandatory circumcision of males.

Of course, what’s true of interpretations of Islam in KSA is not necessarily true of interpretations of Islam in other contexts. For that reason, we think Islam as a religious tradition has the potential to accept democratic values. Islam in this respect is like Christianity or Hinduism, among other major religions; sometimes it is interpreted as compatible with democracy, sometimes it is interpreted as requiring authoritarian states. By changing current interpretations of religious doctrine, citizens and state actors in KSA could move towards a more democratic conception of politics. Although the historical trajectory will not be the same in KSA as it was in Europe, it is worth highlighting that for most of its history Christianity was interpreted in the West as requiring absolute monarchy. Democratic states are a recent historical development and emerged within cultural-religious contexts that for most of their histories were inhospitable do the idea of democracy.

Conclusion

Adopting and promoting one religion arguably helped create a Saudi identity between the 1920s and the 1960s. The founder of the KSA, King Abdul-Aziz, used Wahhabism to create a new state and to keep it united. Yet this model has lost its legitimacy. The KSA needs to recognize religious pluralism and protect the rights of religious minorities. Moving forward, KSA has to promote a culture of toleration through education and significant political reform. Likewise, diversifying the economy and minimizing corruption are also necessary. Unfortunately, some factions in the political opposition are pushing the KSA to become a more stringent theocratic state.

The term 'tolerance' refers to the conditional acceptance of or non-interference with beliefs, actions or practices that one considers to be wrong but still "tolerable," such that they should not be prohibited or constrained (Forst, 2012). In other words, a tolerant state or citizen is one that refrains from advocating restrictions by force against those whose beliefs and practices they oppose. What if any path to toleration is possible in KSA? Can a regime of toleration be imposed by force? Or might if emerge by way of dialogue between different groups? We have considered why imposing radical reforms by force is likely to engender conflict, especially when so many groups within the KSA adhere to political and religious values that are at odds with a regime of toleration. In this context the insights of Azmi Beshara's views on religious toleration are helpful. Beshara inferred from historical and contemporary events that religious toleration always fails if it is left entirely to religious authorities. Historically, religious toleration emerged when political and religious authorities worked together in an effort to negotiate the respective boundaries of religious and political authority. In the long run, theologians and politicians must find ways to justify and legitimize religious toleration by appealing to religious doctrine. Beshara claims that, "…religious toleration [can] be transformed eventually from toleration to a recognition of religious pluralism" (Beshara, 2014, p. 124). Thus, the effort of creating a culture of toleration must be reinforced in many contexts, including, civil society, media, and education.

Religious toleration has to be supported by legal protections for religious freedom. Religious freedom in turn requires an independent judiciary that can limit the majority's power over religious minorities. Without an independent judiciary, the majority would influence legislative or executive authorities to violate the constitutional rights of the religious minority (Finke and Martin, 2014). The prospects for political reforms that expand the right to religious freedom, especially for religious minorities are very poor in KSA. Our position is not that democracy is just around the corner in Saudi Arabia; that would be an extremely

naïve position. Rather, we have considered some of the central variables in play within KSA, including political, ideological, the political economy of rentier-states, international pressure, and education. Of course, we have not offered a complete account of how each of these variables contributes to the range of possible reforms in KSA. We have, however, outlined a framework that provides a more informed perspective on KSA politics compared to those that focus on just one of the variables.

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