

CARNEGIE
P A P E R S

**Middle East
Series**

**THE SAUDI
LABYRINTH:
Evaluating the
Current Political
Opening**

Amr Hamzawy

**Democracy
and Rule of Law**



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

**Number 68
April 2006**

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed unprecedented political dynamism in Saudi Arabia. Since 2002, the government has pursued various reform policies. Its most relevant measures have included reforming the Shura Council, holding municipal elections, legalizing civil society actors, implementing educational reform plans, and institutionalizing national dialogue conferences. Although these measures appear less significant when compared with political developments in other Arab countries, such as Lebanon and Egypt, they constitute elements of a meaningful opening in Saudi authoritarian politics.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Saudi Arabia represented a clear case of authoritarian consolidation. The Al Saud royal family used high oil revenues to boost its control and to expand existing networks of patrimonial allegiance across the country. The state apparatus swelled and, with it, the role of the security forces and the Wahhabi religious establishment grew dominant. The government's authoritarian grip over society tightened. A degree of pluralism rooted in the tribal structures of the Saudi society and in the benevolent rule of the first kings was replaced by an emerging repressive state and an aggressive, fundamentalist Wahhabi ideology.

There were a number of changes that signified this transformation. Among others, the government abolished the municipal elections that had been held regularly up to the 1960s. Dissenting views on political, social, and moral issues were no longer tolerated. Minorities, in particular the Shiite community in the Eastern provinces, suffered from systematic discrimination and hate campaigns. Saudi politics became the monopoly of royal princes, Wahhabi clerics, and their allies in the state bureaucracy.

Although modernization and urbanization processes changed the social map and created a stable middle class, popular demands for reform remained weak. Saudis seemed to either consent to the patrimonial logic of "no taxation, no representation" or approve of the conservative turn taken since the 1970s. The few examples of opposition groups challenging the authoritarianism of the royal family—such as the 1979 seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca by a fundamentalist group and the initial rise of the Islamic Awakening Movement (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) in the 1980s—were efficiently contained.

However, in the 1990s this political scene began to change slightly. The 1991 Gulf War hurt the Saudi economy, and the presence of U.S. troops in the cradle of Islam undermined the legitimacy of the royal family. Rising unemployment and poverty rates led intellectuals and religious scholars to demand substantial political and economic reforms. Most significant, a Memorandum of Advice was addressed to late King Fahd in 1991 in which nearly fifty signatories—religious scholars—called on him to create a legislative council, enact anticorruption measures, and promote an equal distribution

of the country's resources among its citizens. After harsh reactions by the security forces against the signatories, the king announced in 1992 the establishment of an appointed national consultative council, the Shura Council, and detailed a plan to appoint municipal councils in all provinces of the kingdom. However, neither the Shura Council nor the municipal councils were endowed with legislative or oversight powers. In the second half of the 1990s, other minor reform measures, primarily administrative, were implemented to quiet growing popular dissatisfaction.

Since then, the authoritarian grip of the royal family has not loosened. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, the government, faced with the rise of violent jihadist groups, resorted to outright repressive instruments to deal with dissenting views in general and leaned heavily on the religious establishment to generate legitimacy among the population. In return, official Wahhabism stiffened its control over three focal points in society: mosques, courts, and schools.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, exposed Saudi society to the catastrophic outcomes of its authoritarian Wahhabi lethargy. The most immediate impact of the 9/11 attacks was to subject the royal family to increasing international pressure to introduce significant reforms to combat terrorism and extremism. However, the attacks also served as a catalyst for wide-ranging debates among the political and intellectual elites about “what went wrong” and “what should be done.” Domestic calls for reform were suddenly given a better hearing. In recent years these two factors—international and domestic reform demands—have injected new elements of dynamism and openness into Saudi Arabia's political reality. They have also generated sufficient incentives for the government to embark on the road of reform.

MAPPING POLITICAL ACTORS

Recent reform measures in Saudi Arabia have stemmed from power relations among the major political actors. To a great extent, the interplay between the royal family and the Wahhabi religious establishment has determined the pace as well as the scope of implemented reforms. Other actors, however, have also entered the political arena and now play an important role in shaping the reform process. Although far from organized and viable opposition movements, these dissenting groups—most notably liberal reformist groups, moderate Islamists, and conservative religious scholars critical of official Wahhabism—have increasingly placed reform issues in the public space and as such have induced the royal family and the religious establishment to address their demands. Apart from a few confrontational moments, the newcomers have avoided direct clashes with these two giants of Saudi politics. Instead, they have pushed for gradual government concessions in key spheres and tried to sustain the momentum of political opening.

Royal Family

Article 5 of Saudi Arabia's Basic Law of Government issued in 1993 states that

[T]he system of government in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is that of a monarchy. Rule passes to the sons of the founding King, Abdel Aziz bin Abdel Rahman al-Faysal al-Saud, and their children's children. The most upright among them is to receive allegiance in accordance with the principles of the Holy Koran and the Tradition of the Venerable Prophet.

Since its ascendancy to power in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Al Saud family's rule has rarely been challenged. The royal family controls state institutions to such an extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish between them. The executive, the cabinet, and the provincial authorities across the country are directly run by the Saud princes and their close allies in the state bureaucracy. Powerful princes head the security apparatus—the Ministry of Interior and various intelligence agencies—as well as the armed forces. State resources, in particular oil revenues, flow into the royal budget, which is not differentiated from that of the state.

In the absence of any institutionalized mechanisms for accountability, the royal family has always allocated state resources in the manner of absolute monarchs. Increasingly since the oil boom of the 1970s, much has been invested not only to modernize the country but also to sustain, along tribal structures, networks of patrimonial allegiance instrumental for preserving the Al Saud family's power and legitimacy among the population.

A second constant source of preserving power has been official Wahhabism. Since the establishment of the modern Saudi state in 1932, the royal family has ruled this vast heterogeneous country in the name of Wahhabi Islam, a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic teachings that dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century. Wahhabi clerics—organized in a powerful and popular religious establishment that will be discussed below—have in return given legitimacy to the royal family.

The royal family has also effectively constructed international and regional alliances aimed at preserving its power. Most significant, its strategic alliance with the United States since the discovery of oil in 1938 has protected its rule in moments of regional turmoil, in particular during the confrontation with pan-Arab Nasserism in the 1960s and in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1991.

With regard to reform preferences, the royal family has been clearly divided into two factions in recent years. King Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz heads the moderate faction that in recent years has advocated gradual opening and more citizen participation in politics, but only in ways that do not threaten the dominance of the Al Saud family over the country. This faction has also endeavored to inject elements of moderation into official Wahhabism and lessen the discrimination against communities and groups that have suffered most from Wahhabi exclusion, primarily women, Shiite citizens, and dissenting groups.

In the second half of the 1990s, most of the executive authority of ailing King Fahd was moved to then Crown Prince and Prime Minister Abdullah. Long before his ascendancy to power in the summer of 2005, Abdullah had been the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. He promoted most of the reform measures the government has introduced since 2002.

A second prominent representative of the moderate faction is Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister for thirty years. Recently, Saud al-Faisal has openly challenged the Wahhabi religious establishment regarding its conservative positions on women's civil and political rights. In a recent statement he maintained that “nowhere in the Koran is it mentioned that women are not allowed to drive cars, have the right to vote, or choose their career.” The most outspoken representative of moderate royals has always been Prince Talal bin Abdel Aziz, half-brother of King Abdullah. Prince Talal has repeatedly called for reforming the religious establishment and limiting the power of the executive by turning the Shura Council into a partially elected body and vesting it with budgetary oversight.

The second faction in the royal family is less inclined to promote reforms, fearing that the house of Saud might lose control over society as a result. The most powerful representatives of the conservative royals are Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdel Aziz, Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz, who serves as minister of the interior, and Prince Salman bin Abdel Aziz, who governs the Riyadh region. All of them are renowned for their adherence to official Wahhabism, which they view as the essential instrument for keeping the country together. They have also been reluctant to grant minorities and dissenting groups more freedoms, accusing them of destabilizing the social order. In recent years, the conservative faction has worked to slow the pace of reforms and used the backing of the religious establishment to generate popular support for its position.

It is not clear how the power balance between the two royal factions is unfolding. Some observers argue that Abdullah's faction has gained momentum in recent years, while others assert that Sultan, Nayef and Salman have marginalized Abdullah and other moderates. Regardless of the validity of these competing claims, tensions generated out of the differences between the two royal factions are real. They are documented in public statements and reflected in divergent policy preferences. These differences go beyond an alleged division of labor between moderates, who act to quiet internal and external calls for political opening with friendly statements and minor reform measures, and conservatives, who side with the religious establishment and manage the murky reality of repression. Instead, there is a real conflict between members of the royal family who want to handle discontent with reform and those who advocate doing so with security measures. This conflict explains to some extent the limits of the current political opening in Saudi Arabia.

Religious Establishment

Article 23 of the Saudi Basic Law of Government affirms that the “state protects Islam; it implements its *sharia*; it orders people to do right and shun evil; it fulfills the duty regarding God's call.” These stipulations embody the legal foundation of the immense authority the Wahhabi religious establishment enjoys. Public and private morality, education, and the justice system are the spheres of Wahhabi hegemony over society. Fortified by the alliance with the royal family, the religious establishment has evolved into a vast network of institutions, universities, schools, and specialized centers.

The most significant religious institution is the Council of Senior Ulama, established by royal decree in 1971 and Saudi Arabia's highest religious authority. It is composed of twenty clerics appointed by the king and headed by the Grand Mufti. As stipulated in the Basic Law, Article 45, the council's duty is to issue religious informed opinions, or *fatwa*, based on *sharia* on all matters submitted to it by the king. A second important institution is the notorious Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice, which has developed into a powerful law enforcement organ. Its members, which include state employees and volunteers, have the task of safeguarding true Islamic teachings, as defined by official Wahhabism, and penalizing those who violate them. Regular targets for the committee's zeal in the public space are either “inappropriately” veiled women or “ill-mannered” men. The religious establishment also includes other institutions that are directly or indirectly controlled by the Council of Senior Ulama. Among them are the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, and Guidance; the Ministry of Pilgrimage; the Religious Supervision of the Holy Mosque; and various specialized directorates that supervise the educational system.

Since the 1970s, the religious establishment has grown more assertive and developed an aggressive fundamentalist dogma, namely official Wahhabism. It has exercised and perpetuated its power within the framework of a mutually beneficial relationship with the royal family, whereby legitimacy has been traded for the Wahhabi's authority to regulate society. This reciprocal arrangement has given both sides the ability to contain the influence of other political actors, ranging from liberal reformists to conservative religious scholars, and has curbed the reform drive.

In recent years, reform measures advocated by the moderate faction in the royal family have generated much discontent within the religious establishment. Wahhabi clerics, apart from a few marginal moderate voices, have always been critical of political openings. Indeed, the massive increase in their power came after the end of the last liberal period in Saudi Arabia during the 1960s. Since 2002, the clerics have been organizing support among the conservatives in the royal family. In particular they have issued many public statements denouncing the limited measures promoting educational reform and women's rights implemented by the government and have thus far managed to impede the reform process.

Saudi intellectuals and observers differ in their assessment of the balance of power between the royal family and the clerics. Some liberal reformists contend it is the royal family that retains the upper hand. For them, several episodes, ranging from the late King Faisal's decree in the 1960s to permit female education despite fierce Wahhabi opposition, to the recent decree to end the ban on mobile telephones with cameras, show that the Wahhabi clerics will ultimately bow to the will of the ruler. They would not venture to openly oppose current reforms should the royal family demonstrate a resolve to pursue such a course. This view holds that the tension between moderates and conservatives within the royal family has enabled Wahhabi clerics to restrain the reform drive and influence the power balance between the two factions in favor of the conservatives. Yet, an opposing view, held most notably by moderate Islamists, stresses the autonomy of Wahhabi clerics. Although the religious establishment is sustained by generous royal allocations, the religious establishment itself has not been co-opted, but instead continues to defy the royal will.

Regardless of which view is most accurate, in today's Saudi politics the religious establishment remains anti-reform and the only major political force that is not substantially influenced by moderating trends.

Liberal Reformists

In recent years, nonviolent dissenting groups in Saudi Arabia have continued to suffer from various restrictions on political freedoms. Government regulations ban political parties and, to a great extent, limit the right to assemble freely in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Given these conditions, liberal reformists—mostly secular-minded lawyers, university professors, intellectuals, political activists, and journalists—have worked in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to mobilize popular support for their demands and to obtain the ear of the moderate faction in the royal family. Both strategies succeeded in further pushing the envelope for reform and in granting liberal reformists more room for maneuver in the public space.

Since 2002, the liberal reformist platform has focused on granting basic political freedoms and civil rights for men and women. It has also stressed promoting equality between the Sunni majority and the Shiite minorities and enhancing political participation in public matters through

empowering existing consultative institutions and transforming them into elected bodies. Legalizing NGOs and combating terrorism and extremism by limiting the control of the religious establishment over the educational system have been integral components of the liberal reformist platform as well.

Obviously these bold demands have brought liberal reformists into confrontation with the conservative faction in the royal family and with the Wahhabi religious establishment. The lack of institutionalization in parties or opposition movements as well as the absence of organized constituencies outside the urban educated elite makes liberal reformists highly vulnerable to repressive measures and easy to target individually. University professors have been banned from teaching. Travel documents of critical intellectuals have been confiscated. Individuals have been jailed for extended periods of time.

The imprisonment of three of the signatories of the Petition for the Constitutional Monarchy in 2004 is the best-known example of punishment inflicted on liberal reformists in recent years. In December 2003, 116 liberal reformists and moderate Islamists signed a daring petition calling on the government to establish a constitutional monarchy in Saudi Arabia. The signatories advocated comprehensive constitutional reform and enhanced political participation in public matters within the framework of Islamic teachings. Their major demands included (1) granting full-fledged political freedoms and civil rights to all citizens, anchored in a permanent constitution; (2) granting gender equality; (3) introducing the principles of separation of powers and rulers' accountability; (4) electing a house of representatives to serve as the legislative branch of the government; (5) establishing an independent judiciary and introducing procedural mechanisms to ensure its impartiality; (6) creating a supreme constitutional court; (7) lifting restrictions on the formation of civil society organizations and guaranteeing the right to free assembly and peaceful protest; and (8) combating corruption and granting an equitable distribution of state resources.

The signatories called on the government to form an independent national committee composed of constitutional law and other legal experts, religious scholars, and public figures to draft a permanent constitution based on true Islamic teachings and universal principles of democratic governing. They also demanded that the draft constitution be confirmed in a national referendum within one year of its announcement and that the government embark on implementing its provisions in a transitional period that would not exceed three years.

Although the Petition for the Constitutional Monarchy was not the first liberally inspired public document in recent years—it was preceded by other less significant petitions—its bold character outraged both factions within the royal family. The involvement of Shiite religious figures also infuriated some Wahhabi clerics who denounced the petition as blasphemous and the signatories as renegades. In March 2004, police authorities arrested twelve of the signatories but subsequently released nine of them on the condition that they refrain from reiterating similar demands in public and that they end their political activities. The remaining three activists—Ali al-Dumaini, Matruk al-Falih, and Abdullah al-Hamid—refused to agree to these restrictions.¹ Their detention continued, and in May 2005 a court sentenced them to prison terms of six to nine years. King Abdullah, however, pardoned them a few days after his ascendancy to power in August 2005.

The experience of the Petition for the Constitutional Monarchy demonstrates the vulnerability of the liberal reformists. Many of them have learned the lesson and have largely kept a low profile, stressing the need to cooperate with the government in promoting the reform process. This less confrontational strategy recently led to the appointment of a few liberal reformists to the Shura Council.

Moderate Islamists

Moderate Islamists agree with liberal reformists on the need to press for reform, but they have a different destination. Moderate Sunni Islamists, mostly religious scholars critical of the fundamentalist Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, place more emphasis on reforming the religious establishment. They assert that without garnering religious approval and without ensuring the full compatibility of reform demands and *sharia* provisions, broad segments of the Saudi population will ultimately view any reform measures as endangering their values and way of life.

Scholars such as Abdel Aziz al-Qasim, a lawyer based in Riyadh, and Hassan al-Malki, a former instructor at the religious Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, advocate an innovative interpretation of religion that can help ground the modern ideas of accountable government, political participation, human rights, and formation of civil society organizations into a legitimate Islamic framework. They contend that without opening the mosque and the school—the two strongholds of official Wahhabism—to moderate thinking, the battle for reform and the struggle against extremism cannot be won.

Moderate Shiite Islamists, however, take a position similar to that of liberal reformists. Having had to endure Wahhabi discrimination in the last decades, they place no hope in the possibility of reforming the religious establishment. Instead, they have called on the royal family to limit the powers of the Wahhabi clerics and promote the plurality of Islamic schools of thought. Their ultimate objective has been to persuade the royal family that its legitimacy would be established by stressing the commonalities between the Sunni and Shiite communities, instead of depending on official Wahhabism as its only frame of reference.

A second significant difference between liberal reformist and moderate Islamist platforms relates to their views on social and cultural reform issues. Saudi moderate Islamists have remained trapped in illiberal stances that draw on religion to legitimize various restrictions regarding gender equality and freedom of opinion and expression.

Because they challenge official Wahhabism, both Sunni and Shiite moderate Islamists have been frequently targeted by the religious establishment. Some of them—like Hassan al-Malki—lost their teaching jobs at higher education institutions; others found themselves faced with public denunciation campaigns. Nevertheless, the partial convergence of the moderate Islamist platform and liberal reformist demands in recent years has secured the participation of moderate Islamist voices in public debates on reform. However, in today's Saudi politics these voices remain weak. Their new interpretations of Islamic teachings have yet to appeal to the moderate faction in the royal family as an alternative source to legitimize reforms among the population and forgo the restraining influence of Wahhabi clerics.

Remnants of the Islamic Awakening

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Saudi Arabia witnessed the emergence of a conservative Islamist movement which aimed at freeing Wahhabism from the bonds of the alliance between the royal family and the religious establishment. Activists of the Islamic Awakening Movement, primarily graduates of religious universities, accused Wahhabi clerics of being co-opted by the Saudi rulers. For them, the clerics had degenerated from defenders of the *sharia* to subservient mouthpieces always willing to legitimize the ruler's policies.

Especially in the 1990s, the Islamic Awakening Movement grew more politicized and attracted an increasing popular following. In fact the movement even found some adherents within the religious establishment itself, mostly among young clerics. Its platform addressed two major concerns common to Islamist movements in the Arab world at that time: doctrinal purity and social justice. First, it attempted to purify Wahhabism from traces of political co-optation. Second, it raised demands for equitable distribution of state resources and for anticorruption measures, reflecting the widespread popular discontent created by the severe economic and financial crisis that followed the 1991 Gulf War.

The government reacted by imprisoning the leaders of the Islamic Awakening Movement and empowering the religious establishment in order to tame its critics. New Wahhabi universities and institutions were established to curb dissenting views—often through co-optation. In a move to address popular concerns, the government also introduced a series of administrative reforms to combat corruption in the state bureaucracy. The strategies were successful, and by the end of the 1990s the Islamic Awakening Movement had lost momentum.

In recent years, however, two conflicting trends have emerged from the remnants of the Islamic Awakening. First, violent jihadist groups operating within and outside Saudi Arabia have attracted many former followers of the movement, preaching a radical ideology and becoming a real security threat to the state. While the terrorist attacks committed by these groups have enabled the conservative faction in the royal family to push for more stringent security measures and to slow down reform, they have simultaneously strengthened the liberal reformists' and moderate Islamists' belief that reform is the only viable strategy to cure the root causes of terrorism and challenge radical ideologies.

Second, some leading figures of the Islamic Awakening Movement have partially altered their views and moved closer to the liberal reformist and moderate Islamist platforms. Inspired by general trends towards moderation in the Islamist spectrum in the Arab world, scholars like Salman bin Fahd al-Auda, head of the nongovernmental institution Islam Today, and Sifir bin Abdel Rahman al-Hawali, former professor at the religious Um al-Qura University in Mecca, have gradually come to endorse calls for basic political freedoms and popular participation. Al-Auda now even goes so far as to state that nothing in Islam is in conflict with democracy (understood as a system of participation and accountability), provided that it does not contradict *sharia* provisions. Although both al-Auda and al-Hawali remain critical of the religious establishment, they have softened their stance with regard to the royal family. They have called on the government to enact meaningful reform and offered cooperation in combating the jihadist threat.

REFORM MEASURES BETWEEN 2002 AND 2005

The partial convergence of the platforms of liberal reformists, moderate Islamists, and conservative religious scholars and the support of the moderate faction of the royal family have given new momentum recently to the reform process, leading to significant, incremental measures including the strengthening of the Shura Council, the holding of municipal elections, the legalization of a number of civil society organizations, educational reform, and the launching of national dialogues. American pressure has also been an important factor. Indeed, many Saudi intellectuals and observers rate this last factor as the most crucial for sustaining the reform process in recent years.

Reform of the Shura Council

Appointed consultative councils, which have neither legislative nor oversight powers, have a long history in Saudi Arabia. Founding King Abdel Aziz al-Saud authorized the first consultative councils in the 1920s. In 1992 King Fahd changed the Shura Council's regulatory provisions and expanded its role and responsibilities in response to demands by religious scholars presented in the 1991 Memorandum of Advice. In addition to its original duty of offering nonbinding opinions on matters referred to it by the king, the enacted amendments granted the council the right to voice concerns about public matters, send suggestions to the cabinet, and question ministers, but stopped short of endowing it with legislative powers. In its first cycle in 1992, the council consisted of sixty members and a president. By the inauguration of the fourth cycle in 2005, its membership had increased to 150. At present, almost half the council's members are drawn from the Wahhabi religious establishment, and the remainder is made up of university professors, technocrats, and representatives of the business community.

In the 1990s the council's deliberations focused primarily on legal issues pertaining to the *sharia*, socioeconomic development plans, and annual reports of ministries and other government agencies. On all these matters, the council's practice was to issue short, nonbinding recommendations to the cabinet, based on simple majority rules.

In recent years, however, the Shura Council has undergone two meaningful transformations. First, its regulatory provisions have been changed—albeit slowly—to give members a higher degree of autonomy. In December 2003 King Fahd announced that the council would be empowered to play a more active role. In 2005 several amendments were finally enacted. Most significant, Article 17 of the council's regulatory provisions was changed to allow the council to present its recommendations directly to the king, instead of the cabinet, ensuring an improved degree of responsiveness on the side of the executive. Also, Article 23 was amended to give council members more freedom in proposing, discussing, and enacting new internal regulations. However, the reformists' expectation that the amendments might provide for partial elections of the council's members and endow it with some oversight powers over the cabinet did not materialize.

Second, the council has grown more political due to the diversification of its membership and agenda as liberal reformists and moderate Islamists have been appointed to the council. The new members have voiced concerns about political reform and challenged the dominance of Wahhabi clerics over the inner workings of the council. In addition, since 2003 the president of the council—while making it clear that full membership for women is not on the council's agenda—has frequently extended invitations to female scholars and activists to attend open sessions and to consult members on social issues relevant to women. The content of debate in the Shura Council has clearly moved beyond the unpoliticized legacy of the 1990s.

Debates in the Shura Council have also become public due to media coverage that includes uncensored televised broadcasts. Council members have discussed prominent issues such as strategies to combat terrorism and extremism, fiscal policies, public expenditures, corruption allegations against government officials, and educational reform plans. They have also acquired enough autonomy to tackle matters that were previously declared taboo for public discussion. A telling case was the council's debate on the new traffic law in the summer of 2005. Muhammad al-Zulfa, a liberal reformist member of the council, proposed to include the legalization of driver licenses for

women on the agenda. Although it was not allowed to reach the floor, al-Zulfa's proposal forced the council to address this highly explosive matter in public for the first time.

These changes have not led to concrete policy outcomes so far. The Shura Council still has no real legislative power and is not a representative institution, since it is not elected. Nonetheless, the position of the council in Saudi politics has shifted from a marginal body dominated by Wahhabi clerics to a venue for vibrant public debates reflecting the plurality of views on reform concerns.

Municipal Elections

In 1993 a royal decree introduced a revised system of provincial government. Appointed municipal councils were to be established across the country to monitor local developments and advise executive authorities. The decree detailed the municipal councils' duties and responsibilities, which were mostly of an administrative nature, including preparing budgetary programs, supervising regulations regarding public services, monitoring public revenues and spending, and voicing opinion on issues referred to them by the executive.

In 2005, in direct response to domestic reform demands, the government decided to hold partial elections for the country's 178 municipal councils. The elections took place in three stages over a period of three months from February to April 2005 and were highly contested. In Riyadh, for example, 646 candidates competed for seven municipal seats. The voter turnout ranged from 25 to 35 percent of eligible voters. Moderate Islamists, in both Sunni- and Shiite-dominated provinces, emerged as winners in most races. Women were excluded as voters and candidates.

Most Arab and Western accounts were quick to dismiss the municipal elections as irrelevant, merely a cosmetic step taken to ease international reform pressure. Most analyses highlighted the various shortcomings of these partial elections, particularly the exclusion of women as voters and candidates, the triviality of the councils' duties, and the great influence of tribal loyalties and confessional affiliations in determining voter preferences.

Such hasty dismissal reveals a lack of understanding of Saudi politics. The tribal loyalties and confessional affiliations clearly manifested in the municipal elections did not represent incurable elements of backwardness. Rather, they entailed an important moment of pluralism. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the Saudi government suppressed diversity in society. The surfacing of tribal and confessional affiliations in today's politics represents a reassertion of pluralism and ultimately serves to push the reform process forward. After all, only a consensus-oriented participatory political system is capable of accommodating diversity peacefully.

The municipal elections have served three important purposes with regard to the reform process. First, as Saudi Arabia's first elections since the 1960s, they reinvigorated the forgotten memory of popular participation. Second, they set a precedent for opening existing consultative bodies for pluralist contestation. And, third, the elections garnered great attention among the Saudi population and helped strengthen the debates on reform.

Legalization of Human Rights Organizations and Professional Syndicates

Over the past two years, the Saudi government has approved the establishment of two human rights organizations, institutionalized professional syndicates, and permitted the participation of women

as voters and candidates in some of their board elections. These changes indicate a greater readiness on the part of the government to expand civil society and create modern mechanisms for better representation.

In April 2004 the government approved the establishment of the country's first nongovernmental human rights organization, the Saudi National Organization for Human Rights (NOHR), whose mandate is monitoring human rights violations and reporting them to relevant government organs, especially the Ministry of Interior.² Since its establishment, the NOHR has organized visits to prisons in all regions and devoted special attention to longtime detainees being held without charges. The organization has also investigated cases of prisoner mistreatment. It has, however, kept a low profile on issues pertaining to freedom of expression and politically motivated detentions. For example, the NOHR never took a public position on the detention of the three signatories of the Petition for the Constitutional Monarchy. It has also failed to address discriminatory practices against women and Shiite citizens. Indeed, since the creation of the NOHR, there has been no substantial improvement in the Saudi human rights record. These weaknesses have negatively impacted the organization's image. Dissenting groups have come to view the NOHR as a co-opted arm of the government created to quiet international criticisms.

The establishment of the first governmental human rights agency in December 2005 has only increased these doubts. The Saudi Human Rights Agency (SHRA) is concerned with spreading awareness about human rights and contributing to their implementation in accordance with Islamic teachings. The SHRA, whose members are appointed by the king, has the mandate of consulting and supervising the government on human rights issues. Regardless of the real motives behind the creation of the SHRA, it is difficult to imagine that it will be able to transcend the legacy of governmental human rights organizations elsewhere in authoritarian countries, where activities are geared to disguise and justify human rights violations.

On the level of less politicized NGOs, Saudi Arabia's first-ever syndicate for journalists was authorized in June 2004. Two female journalists were appointed to the syndicate's nine-member board. This opening for women in professional syndicates has gained more momentum over the last months. In December 2005 the Saudi National Agency for Engineers held its board elections and, in a bold move, admitted women as both voters and candidates. Seventy male candidates and one female engineer contested seven seats. The female engineer won a seat. Finally, the government has authorized partial elections in provincial chambers of commerce. Female members could either vote—as in elections for the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce—or participate as both voters and candidates—as in the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and the elections of Eastern Region Chamber of Commerce.

Undoubtedly the legalization of various NGOs has opened up Saudi civil society and created new opportunities for citizens' participation. The government's measures in this regard—modest in absolute terms but bold when compared with steps taken in other areas—have also highlighted the fact that the reform process in Saudi Arabia is bound to be uneven. Women acquired the right to vote and run for syndicates' board elections only to be completely excluded from the municipal elections. And even though the role of women in civil society has improved greatly, the Wahhabi religious establishment has retained the ability to coerce the government into upholding conservative stances on female personal freedoms.

Educational Reform Measures

Although there were some signs of governmental interest in modernizing education in the 1990s, the real push in this field followed the attacks of 9/11. Since then, educational reform has been framed in the context of combating terrorism. External actors, primarily the United States, have systematically accused the Wahhabi-controlled educational system of being a hotbed of extremism and pressured the Saudi government to introduce meaningful reforms to promote the values of tolerance and pluralism. Domestically, liberal reformists have also included educational reform in their platform, calling on the government to limit the influence of the religious establishment and inject elements of moderation into the curricula. The shockwaves of 9/11 and the rising jihadist threat have enabled liberal reformists to focus public attention on the importance of educational reform in promoting a culture of pluralism and sustaining the current political opening.

In recent years, the moderate faction in the royal family has clashed several times with the religious establishment over educational reform plans. Specifically, U.S. pressure concerning educational reform has hardened the position of Wahhabi clerics fearful of losing one of their strongholds in society. Therefore, considerable opposition to government measures has emerged, greatly diminishing the moderate royals' room for maneuver. The result has been a series of hesitant reform measures that have stopped short of introducing a significant shift in Saudi education.

Between 2002 and 2005, the Ministry of Education undertook several steps to remove extremist ideas from the curricula and create a balance between religious and nonreligious topics. In 2002, discriminatory references to Shiite Muslims and non-Muslims were partially removed from textbooks and replaced by passages calling for the respect of other religions and cultures. In 2003 and 2004, the liberal-minded Minister of Education, Muhammad al-Rashid, merged the administrative structure of the male and female branches of education and unified the curricula in nonreligious topics for both branches. He also announced a plan to introduce English language instruction in primary schools.

All these steps were vehemently opposed by Wahhabi clerics, particularly the unification of male and female curricula as well as the minimal increase in credit hours devoted to nonreligious sciences. Although the Wahhabi opposition has not persuaded the government to reverse its measures, as 156 clerics demanded in an early 2004 petition, it has clearly diminished the government's ability to push for more. Al-Rashid was ousted from the cabinet in February 2005 after an orchestrated denunciation campaign against him. Abdullah Salih al-Ubaid, a graduate of the ultraconservative Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, replaced him.

In fact, during the last year the moderate faction in the royal family has come under more pressure with regard to implemented reforms. Recently, King Abdullah had to state publicly that there is no compromise on the Islamic nature of the educational system, affirming that "this country is either Islamic or nothing at all."

Institutionalization of the National Dialogue Conferences

In June 2003 the government announced an initiative to host national dialogue conferences to discuss needed reforms and promote freedom of expression. The government-sponsored Abdel Aziz Center for National Dialogue subsequently launched a series of meetings, extending invitations to male and female university professors, intellectuals, and activists. Representatives of the Shiite

minority and liberal reformists participated in the meetings alongside Wahhabi clerics and government officials. To date, five rounds of the national dialogue conferences held between June 2003 and December 2005 have addressed the future of political reform, radicalism and moderation, women's status, youth problems, and intercultural dialogue.

Participants made some bold proposals, ranging from electing the members of the Shura Council, recognizing equal political rights for women, promoting equitable distribution of state resources, enacting antidiscrimination measures in favor of the Shiite community, and empowering civil society organizations. Controversial discussions culminated in a number of recommendations that, while not binding, have been selectively implemented by the government; the reform of the Shura Council and the municipal elections in 2005 are two important examples.

The national dialogue conferences have had other significant consequences. They have offered dissenting groups a platform to articulate their reform demands and exposed the Saudi public to a plurality of schools of thought, which official Wahhabism has long suppressed. The national dialogue conferences have gradually evolved into open marketplaces for reform ideas and visions. They have also inspired the emergence of nongovernmental intellectual forums across a country that has long lacked uncensored venues to voice public concerns and promote citizens' participation. In the absence of democratic deliberations in politics, the growing margin of freedom of expression in the public space has become the focal point for pluralist contestations in Saudi Arabia.

POTENTIAL FOR FURTHER SIGNIFICANT REFORM

Reforms implemented by the Saudi government in recent years have revitalized existing consultative councils and introduced the mechanism of elections at the municipal level. New opportunities for citizen participation in civil society have emerged, and the margin of freedom in the public space has expanded significantly. In addition, the political spectrum has grown more diverse with the entry of new players, who have garnered popular support for their reform platforms.

Although these changes represent a significant opening in Saudi politics, they have not altered the authoritarian nature of the political system fundamentally. The royal family and the Wahhabi religious establishment have sustained their domineering positions in society. Their ability to block, stall, and even reverse reforms has not diminished substantially. In the absence of competing power centers, the reform process has remained inherently vulnerable and limited. In spite of the expansion of its functions, the Shura Council has not acquired real legislative or oversight power to hold the government, let alone the royal family, accountable. Government promises to ensure the independence of the judiciary and limit Wahhabi control over it have not materialized beyond a series of minimal administrative reform measures with no significant impact. As the experience of the Petition for the Constitutional Monarchy has demonstrated, the empowerment of liberal reformists and other dissenting groups has not protected them from government repression or Wahhabi denunciations. And although two human rights organizations were legalized, human rights violations and discriminatory treatment of specific groups of the population have not decreased.

Within these limits and given the unchanged concentration of power in the hands of the royal family and the religious establishment, there are four realistic avenues to sustain the reform process and expand political freedoms in today's Saudi Arabia.

Consolidating Shura and Municipal Councils

Increasing the number of Shura Council members to 150 and their gradual empowerment in recent years have made the council a relevant institution in Saudi politics. One possibility to enhance this positive development is to introduce elections of at least a portion of the council's members. Indeed, liberal reformists and moderate Islamists alike have called on the government to consent to the election of a share of members—proposals range from 25 to 50 percent. A few members of the council have voiced similar demands in public and, in an attempt to garner support in the royal family, have proposed that elected members be approved by the king in the final instance.

There have been growing signs since 2002 that the moderate faction in the royal family has transcended the fear of elections. Holding elections in municipal councils and professional syndicates has not threatened the stability or the legitimacy of the house of Al Saud. In a recent televised meeting with members of the council, King Abdullah indirectly embraced the demand for introducing a partial election stating that “the nation looks to you—members of the Shura Council—as its representatives and we will ensure that you truly be so.”

Vesting limited oversight powers in the council represents a second realistic priority for further empowerment. In contrast to maximalist demands of some liberal reformists who ask for immediate accountability of the executive before the council and full budgetary oversight, a minimalist, incremental approach might prove to be more effective. Extending the council's purview to allow questioning ministers and civil servants on public expenditures and resource allocation would allow members to acquire a more supervisory role over government workings and ensure more continuity than the current practice of only discussing ministerial annual reports.

With regard to municipal councils, two reform measures are within reach. One measure—the gradual extension of the election mechanism to cover all seats in the councils instead of the current 50 percent—seems acceptable to the royal family; therefore, its authorization is probably only a matter of time. A second measure also within reach—democratizing the internal functioning of the councils—would transform them into more vibrant places of political deliberations. At present, local councils' presidents, who are chosen from among appointed members, determine the final agenda, proposals, and recommendations. Limiting their powers and delegating more responsibilities to members appears essential. Indeed, last summer the Shura Council announced a proposal to this effect, calling on the government to vest more authority to members than to presidents of municipal councils.

Expanding Civil Society

In spite of the significant opening in Saudi civil society, the legalization of NGOs has remained—even by regional standards—restrictive. Legalization depends on authorization by various officials, and government agencies continue to hold sway over the inner workings of approved organizations such as the NOHR. An important step to change this situation is to gradually ease restrictions on the legalization of new organizations, particularly those that address issues such as political freedoms and human rights. In recent years, the great majority of liberal reformists, moderate Islamists, and conservative religious scholars have been forced to rely on informal networks to coordinate their activities. The move to legality would allow these groups to enhance popular participation in public matters and enable them to inject more elements of moderation into society. Due to the continued

absence of political parties, NGOs are bound to acquire the significant role of defending citizens' civil rights, representing their demands to the government, and safeguarding pluralism in the public space.

As mentioned earlier, the government has recently authorized the establishment of a few professional syndicates and permitted partial or full elections of their boards. The possibility of expanding this precedent in the near future to cover more professions is real. Obviously the government fears that the emergence of syndicates as modern patterns for organized interest representation might challenge existing networks of patrimonial allegiance and lead to increased politicization in the public space. Indeed, in other Arab countries—Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait—opposition groups have used professional syndicates to articulate their platforms in public and build constituencies in urban centers. Islamist movements, in particular, started establishing themselves as key actors in Arab politics by participating in, and often winning, the syndicates' internal elections, evoking in some cases government repression to contain them. Saudi authorities are aware of this history, and they can be expected to subject the leadership of the syndicates to restrictions and co-optation. Yet, the mere increase in the total number of syndicates would constitute a significant step forward in the institutionalization of civil society.

Finally, since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the government has taken measures to regulate the explosive terrain of nongovernmental Islamic charity. The Saudi government has banned many charitable organizations or prohibited them from operating outside the country because of their widespread radical leanings and the suspicion that these organizations finance terrorist groups. Although understandable and indeed necessary in many cases, such government restrictions have unfortunately inflicted harm on some organizations that never indulged in illegal practices. As in other countries of the Arab world, Islamic charity organizations in Saudi Arabia have always been a pillar of civil society. Most of them have served to protect underprivileged citizens and therefore attracted a broad following. In fact, some—in particular those directed by moderate Islamists—have been partially dedicated to civic education and human rights projects. Easing restrictions on charity organizations, while holding their boards accountable for abiding by government regulations and encouraging them to direct part of their activities toward disseminating a culture of tolerance and pluralism, would add immensely to the current momentum in the Saudi civil society.

Promoting Educational Reform

Education is perhaps one of the most sensitive areas for future reform. Efforts since 2002 have failed to generate a significant change in the educational system because the religious establishment has blocked many changes and because liberal reformists and moderate Islamists differ a great deal regarding educational reform and have thus been unable to present a united front. Liberal reformists favor a substantial change in the educational curricula to ensure a balance between religious and nonreligious subjects. Many of them rightly contend that the current curricula are generally superficial and detached from present-day issues. Moderate Islamists would like to keep the overall religious orientation of the curricula unchanged and focus primarily on omitting extremist ideas regarding the Shiite community, Christians, and Jews from textbooks.

Despite these obstacles, small-scale reform steps remain plausible. Textbooks have by no means been completely purged of the extremist baggage of the last three decades. Discriminatory references to the Shiite community and other minorities in Saudi Arabia have not disappeared fully. Infusing tolerance and respect for the plurality of Islamic schools of thought has lagged in recent years. On

all these issues, incremental improvement remains possible even without a complete overhaul of the educational system.

Another area where incremental improvement is possible is teacher training. Since 2002 the Ministry of Education has started international training and exchange programs for teachers. These programs, designed to expose Saudi instructors to moderate regional and international teaching environments, can be intensified in the future.

Admittedly, these steps, should the government undertake them, would not substantially alter the fundamental reality of the Saudi educational system, which is the hegemony of the religious establishment. That problem cannot be overcome in the short run. But by focusing on existing free spaces to get around the main obstacle, reforms can at least change to some extent what is being transmitted in classrooms.

Gender Equality

Gender equality is the most emotional of all reform issues being discussed in Saudi Arabia at present. The domestic debate on women's status in society has moved beyond the set of demands that have become popular in the West—for example, permitting female driver licenses and eliminating *sharia*-imposed restrictions on women's mobility. At the core of the current debate are women's civil rights and political participation.

Saudis are extremely divided on this issue and, as a result, contradictory trends are emerging. Women were excluded as voters and candidates from municipal elections, but shortly thereafter they were allowed to participate in both capacities in professional syndicate elections. The religious establishment still upholds its position insisting that women be banned almost entirely from the public sphere, but liberal reformists and a few moderate Islamists have become more outspoken in demanding equal rights for women, often with the endorsement of moderate royals. As a result, female intellectuals and scholars have participated in the national dialogue conferences, voicing their concerns with an unprecedented daring resolve. At the same time, however, the number of female appointments to high-ranking government positions has remained stagnant.

Given the contradictory nature of recent developments, only additional minor steps are attainable in the short run. Women's involvement in the public space can and will continue to increase because the precedent-setting participation of women in syndicate elections cannot be reversed. It is also possible that the government will adopt and implement legal measures aimed at improving the status of women in the private sphere; the problem of domestic violence has been debated in recent years in a rather taboo-breaking way. It is imaginable that women will be granted the right to cast their ballot in next municipal elections and, should the government decide to introduce it, in the partial election for the Shura Council. But the recognition of equal rights for women in Saudi Arabia remains, at best, a long way off.

ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

Promoting the current political opening in Saudi Arabia presents the United States with a set of difficult challenges. In the Saudi case, the United States lacks the leverage of economic or military aid

that can be conditioned to the implementation of further reform measures. On the contrary, the U.S. economy depends a great deal on Saudi oil, which has grown even more important in recent years. Promoting reform in a country like Saudi Arabia is also inherently difficult. Domestic dynamics generate very few possibilities for a significant U.S. role.

As a result, U.S. pressure for reform since 9/11 has been inconsistent and has had limited effect. Shocked by the fact that most of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudi citizens, the Bush administration pressed the royal family to combat terrorism and extremism—and that pressure continues. In 2002 and 2003, prior to the invasion of Iraq, the administration also unleashed an unprecedented barrage of rhetoric about the necessity for Saudi reform, targeting in particular the absence of political participation and the educational system. Fearful of losing its strategic alliance with the United States and amid growing domestic demands for change, the royal family did respond and implemented some reforms, as discussed earlier.

However, the emergence of the Iraqi turmoil has pushed the pendulum of U.S.–Saudi relations back in the opposite direction. Over the past two years, the Bush administration has softened its stance vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and kept a low profile on Saudi domestic issues. The royal family, for its part, has resorted to scare tactics, arguing that rapid, uncontrolled reforms would undermine its authority, leading to a jihadist takeover. The United States, worried about the possibility of total destabilization in the Gulf region, has abated its pressure for reform. U.S. security needs in Iraq and dramatic increases in oil prices have also contributed to this change. Today's bilateral relations demonstrate growing areas of convergence. The rift that 9/11 created between the U.S. and Saudi governments has largely been repaired.

In its search for entry points to promote reform in Saudi Arabia, the United States is also constrained by Saudi domestic realities. Although the current political opening is undoubtedly significant, it is by no means the beginning of a Saudi democratization process. This is not a country that can be expected to legalize political parties or organize truly competitive elections in the near future. By the same token, the emergence of a powerful legislative authority or an independent judiciary is unlikely. Reforming the authoritarian polity in Saudi Arabia is bound to follow a slow path—an uneven process that entails the gradual expansion of political representation and the creation of new spaces where citizens enjoy limited freedoms. Disagreements about certain issues such as the *mélange* of religion and politics as well as the role of women in public life are integral parts of introducing reforms in a country like Saudi Arabia.

Given these conditions, the United States has two realistic entry points to encourage political reform in Saudi Arabia. First, at the government-to-government level, the administration should support the demands of Saudi dissenting groups advocating reform. Broadening the power of the Shura Council, electing at least some of its members, and legalizing more NGOs and syndicates deserve particular support. Pressing the Saudi government on these issues would also allay popular suspicion of U.S. intentions because domestic actors have articulated similar demands.

Second, at the nongovernmental level, the United States should offer to intensify its contacts with civil society actors. Such an endeavor will necessitate joint efforts by the administration and by U.S. nongovernmental organizations operating in the fields of democracy promotion and human rights. The Saudi government must be pressured to allow freer cooperation between international and domestic NGOs, something which remains extremely difficult at present. Gradually including Saudi NGOs and professional syndicates in ongoing regional programs as well as devising country-specific

measures can help develop their capacities and embolden their reform platforms by exposing them to the international democracy promotion agenda.

However, on other issues such as educational reform and gender equality, the United States would be better advised to keep a low profile. These two issues, often seen as soft entry points by democracy promoters, are highly sensitive in the Saudi case. Previous U.S. interventions in favor of liberal curricula and women's empowerment between 2002 and 2003 were discredited in public by all domestic actors, including female activists. Furthermore, domestic actors remain highly divided on these issues.

The steps advocated here are modest. But in a country like Saudi Arabia, which is only now beginning to take the first steps toward liberalization, it is better for the United States to set modest goals and promote them consistently than to indulge in the grand rhetorical statement about democracy that cannot be backed by a clear policy.

NOTES

- 1 Compared with Ali al-Dumaini and Matruk al-Falih, who have been active in liberal reformist circles in recent years, al-Hamid's background is more rooted in the moderate Islamist spectrum.
- 2 The NOHR is composed of forty-one members, mostly of the liberal reformist group. Nine of its members are female scholars and activists.

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