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Examining the Relationship between Economic Reform and Political Freedom: Vision 2030 and Democratic Transition in Saudi Arabia

Asmaa Elbanna

Abstract

Saudi Vision 2030 aims to engender structural economic change in Saudi Arabia and promises greater transparency, accountability, citizen engagement, and more open economic and social spaces. If successful in the long term, it could reconfigure the relationship between state and citizenry and reshape the entire political system, or lead to democratic transition. This paper examines the impact of Vision 2030 on democratisation in the kingdom. Drawing on the concepts of democratic transition, the rentier state, and the authoritarian bargain as a theoretical framework, the paper adopts a descriptive analytical approach to understand the relationship between economic reform and democratisation. It concludes that the Saudi regime tactically implements economic reforms for several purposes: to contain internal and external changes, to monopolise power, and to endow the regime with new legitimacy at home and abroad. Three indicators support this conclusion: the reconstitution of elites and the centralisation of power, the continued suppression of the opposition, and the regime's interest in ensuring the stability and perpetuation of authoritarianism.

Keywords: Political Economy; Saudi Arabia; Authoritarianism; Vision 2030; Democratisation

Introduction

In 2016, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) released Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to bring about structural economic change by reducing dependence on oil, diversifying the economy, and empowering the private sector. In tandem with the vision, the state pledged to achieve greater transparency, accountability, and citizen participation, and to open up more economic and social spaces.[1] Following soon thereafter were a number of economic and social reforms that liberalised the public sphere somewhat and granted women several rights.[2] At the same time, Saudi Arabia has been beset by several political tribulations, most relevantly the ongoing power struggles within the royal family, the regime's approach to dissidents and reformists, and the growing opposition in the country and abroad.[3] In light of this, the paper looks at the impact of Vision 2030 and subsequent economic and social reforms on democratisation in Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030's plan for structural change could reconfigure the relationship between the state and citizens and provide for greater economic, social, political, and cultural openness that, in the long term, could result in the restructuring of the political system and perhaps a successful democratic transition. The study poses the following question: Does Saudi Vision 2030 promote democratisation?

The study posits that the economic and social reforms implemented by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman are cosmetic reforms through which the regime is attempting to adapt to internal and external changes, maintain regime stability and continuity, and concentrate power in the hands of King Salman and the crown prince. Adopting a descriptive analytical approach in order to understand the impact of Vision 2030 on the political reality and democratisation in the KSA, the paper first discusses the concepts of democratic transition, the rentier state, and the authoritarian bargain before examining the state and the spheres of influence in the Saudi political system. It then discusses the economic crisis that confronted the state in 2014, which led to the release of Vision 2030 and subsequent economic and social reforms that opened up the public sphere to some extent and granted more rights to women. Finally, the paper discusses the impact of Vision 2030 on democratisation in the KSA.

The significance of this study stems from its focus on the relationship between, on one hand, the economic aspects of Vision 2030 and the economic and social reforms implemented under its umbrella and, on the other, the democratic transition and the Saudi political system. The literature on Saudi Arabia takes varied approaches to the subject. Some research looks at the KSA in the context of the Arabian Gulf region and raises questions about authoritarianism and democratisation,[4] economic policies,[5] and social and cultural changes.[6] Other studies examine the evolution of the Saudi political system, its features, sources of legitimacy, and circles of influence,[7] or the calls for political reform in the kingdom.[8] Some research delves further into the economy, spotlighting rentier policies and the political economy of the state, or economic reforms in the KSA,[9] while other studies consider the impact of Vision 2030 on the economy and the future of the country.[10] Complementing this literature, the paper contributes to the debate on the relationship between economic and political variables, discussing the impact of the post-2014 economic reforms on democratisation.

Theoretical Framework

To investigate the relationship between economic reform and democratisation in rentier states, this study draws on the analytical concepts of democratic transition, the rentier state, and the authoritarian bargain. Democratic transition refers to the transition from a non-democratic to a democratic political system; this shift occurs in several distinct phases starting with the demise of the authoritarian regime followed by the emergence of a modern democracy striving to consolidate the democratic system. Democratisation entails a transformation of all aspects of the system, from the elite to structures and institutions, to economics and culture.[11] In terms of its social and political content, democratisation radically transforms power relations in the political sphere and hierarchical relations in the social, economic, and cultural spheres.[12] Researchers differ on the prerequisites for a democratic transition. The model of transition varies from one country to the next and from one political system to another due to the differences in existing political systems. A transition may be affected in one of two ways: through peaceful means, whereby it is initiated by the ruling authority or through constitutional amendments and elections; and non-peaceful mechanisms, whereby violence is used by the elites, as in the case of military coups, or by the masses, as in the case of popular protests and revolutions.[13]

Several indicators are used to assess the success of democratic transition and the consolidation of democracy. These may be institutional and organisational factors related to the stability of the foundations and rules of the democratic game, such as the holding of regular elections and the acceptance of their results, and the consolidation of democratic political institutions that continue to adapt to contextual developments. Others relate to the strategies and practices of key political actors and their genuine commitment to the foundations and norms of democracy, including during economic and political crises, meaning that none of these actors contemplate mounting a coup against democracy or operating outside its frameworks and norms.[14]

The concept of the rentier state is associated with Hossein Mahdavy, who in 1970 defined it as a state that regularly receives significant financial resources from the external rents paid by other individuals, institutions, or governments. While oil revenues and exports represent rents, rents are not exclusively related to oil but can be derived from multiple sources, such as fees for passing through a waterway or transporting oil through the territory of a particular country.[15] Giacomo Luciani opposed the rentier state to the productive state, whose revenues come mainly from production and manufacturing and taxes on citizens. In contrast, the rentier state owns resources and wealth and its chief function is to distribute the benefits to members of society; the rentier state does not levy taxes, and the public and private interest are so intertwined that the resulting corruption is considered acceptable.[16] Hazem Beblawi asserts that the rentier state is one that derives part of its financial revenues from external sources in the form of an economic rent, and this includes revenues from the sale of oil and its derivatives in global markets. Beblawi sketches four basic features of the rentier state: the economy relies predominantly on income from rent; the source of rent is external; a minority of the population in the rentier state contributes to the generation of rents while the majority is involved solely in consumption and exploitation; and the state or government is the main recipient and beneficiary of external rents or rentier revenues. This concentration of rents allows for the seizure and monopolisation of political power and thus the emergence of an entity whose decisions and policies are made independently of society, such that the authority does not derive its legitimacy from society, but from rent.[17] The political system in rentier states is a form of authoritarianism that relies on specific political practices for the maintenance of power, most importantly the authoritarian bargain.

The authoritarian bargain is one mechanism by which authoritarian regimes survive. Under the terms of the bargain, rulers provide economic benefits and services to citizens, who in exchange cede their political rights and so are subject to restrictions on political participation, involvement in decision-making and accountability, and political and civil liberties. The authoritarian bargain relies on two types of mechanisms. The first is redistributive public policies, which are used to cultivate elites and win popular support. Here the regime seeks to build a system of patronage and clientelist relationships through a series of strategic transfers to elites, such as leaders of the armed forces, government bureaucrats who control the state apparatuses, and at times a segment of the business community. Secondly, rulers use domestic political reform to maintain regime stability under difficult economic conditions, granting some political rights— of limited impact—to citizens in order to maintain regime continuity and as an alternative to the collapse of the authoritarian bargain caused by a lack of resources.[18]

Saudi Arabia is a prototype of the rentier state, depending chiefly on one type of external rent—oil revenues—which makes up more than ninety per cent of public revenues and is fully integrated in foreign markets. The state owns this rent and controls the distribution of revenues,[19] and the regime derives its legitimacy from its ownership of oil revenues. Power is concentrated in the hands of the ruling family, which controls the levers and resources of the state and uses oil revenues to buy the loyalty of citizens, providing services as a trade-off for political participation and involvement in decision-making.[20] The Saudi political authority relies on the authoritarian bargain to maintain and perpetuate the regime, and it uses these benefits and services to define its relationship with individuals and their view of their political rights. From its inception, the state has relied on the distribution of real estate and land to relatives, the royal family, and various elites in order to buy loyalty and support.[21] This approach continued after the discovery of oil, when the state similarly began distributing project contracts, partnerships with the government, and other resources to ensure the loyalty of various elites. In 2011 and 2012, when the KSA witnessed several protests calling for political reform. The regime's reaction—aside from a wave of arrests—came in the form of economic measures, or what might be called royal dispensations. King Abdullah issued a set of financial orders that included a fifteen per cent increase in the salaries of state employees, social security assistance, education funding, the provision of jobs, and the disbursement of new grants to the people, as well as unemployment assistance, more housing loans, and loan waivers for citizens. With these measures, the state sought to renew its bargain with citizens, which relies on spending and welfare in exchange for the continued renunciation of political rights.[22]

The Political Regime and the State in the KSA

The kingdom was established in its current form in 1932 by King Abdulaziz Al Saud. His sons succeeded him—Saud, Faisal, Khalid, Fahd, Abdullah, and then Salman—successfully building a vast network of traditional relationships based on lineage, kinship, and religion, and another network of state institutions based on the distribution of bureaucratic positions and the division and deployment of oil revenues. Since the system's establishment, the state's strategy has been to address external challenges and maintain the regime's internal legitimacy and stability.[23] Since the

1970s, the KSA's revenue from oil—which accounts for more than ninety per cent of state revenues—has triggered vast economic and social transformations. Despite several attempts to establish industries in steel, cement, petrochemicals, and tourism, these projects have remained marginal, failing to change the structure of the economy and diversify its resources.[24]

During its founding stage, from 1902 to 1932, the kingdom was preoccupied with nation-building and unifying various political entities. The would-be state was divided among six independent emirates, each of which considered itself a self-contained empire, and was home to hundreds of tribes, each considering itself to control the area wherein it had settled. The process of unifying the kingdom therefore took more than thirty years, until in 1932 the last emirate acceded and King Abdulaziz Al Saud declared the creation of the KSA.[25] When discussing the contemporary Saudi political system, we must go back to 1992, when King Fahd bin Abdulaziz consolidated the rules and regulations governing the kingdom into a single document called the Basic Law. It consists of three sections: a constitutional document written after the kingdom was declared unified, the incorporating document of the Shura Council, and a system dividing the country's regions and establishing an administration in each one.[26] Despite the existence of a constitution, the political system in Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. The king is the axis of the political process, and the royal family controls the levers of state, decision-making, and state resources. Members of the ruling family enjoy generous financial stipends, and the princes own vast tracts of land and numerous enterprises. The portion of the state budget allocated to the royal family cannot be quantified with any certainty.[27]

In the Saudi political system, the king is the supreme power, the central figure, and the actual ruler. All powers, prerogatives, and functions are concentrated in his hands; he is the highest executive, legislative, and judicial authority, the prime minister, the supreme commander of all military forces, the chief judge, and first diplomat.[28] From the time of the state's establishment, Saudi rulers have been accruing even more power and expanding their sphere of influence.[29] When the king succeeds to the throne, he pledges allegiance to his successor, the crown prince, who need not be one of his sons. The crown prince is the number two man in the state; he assumes power after the death of the king and occupies critical state positions. The selection of the crown prince was the sole prerogative of the king until 2006, when the Succession Commission was created by King Abdullah to regulate the process.[30] The prerogatives of the crown prince are not fixed, but vary from person to person according to his influence and his proximity to the king. The crown prince does not confine himself to his official position, he instead seeks to amass greater responsibilities. Typically his power stems from the positions he holds, alliances with family members, and his closeness to the king.[31]

The Council of Ministers represents the executive and organisational authority, in accordance with the Basic Law.[32] The ruling family controls the most important sovereign positions on the council, such as defence, interior, and the national guard, which are passed down from father to son, and the ruling family controls the process of selecting the remaining members of the council. It is thus difficult to consider the Council of Ministers an organ that can exert direct pressure within the system.[33] As for the Shura Council, appointed by royal decree in 1992,[34] it is solely an advisory body with no legislative and oversight functions analogous to parliaments in other countries. Even its advisory function is limited, as all decisions rest with the king, who has the exclusive right to appoint council members and determine their rights and duties. Despite attempts to give the Shura Council a greater margin of freedom—for example, by increasing the number of members and giving them the right to question ministers—the changes instituted by these reforms are purely cosmetic. The body is far from functioning as a parliament, even compared to other Gulf states.[35] With regard to the judiciary, it is formally independent in that it is subject only to the provisions of Islamic law. Practically speaking, however, it is not independent: pursuant to a royal order issued in 1927, the judicial system was unified and the king was given absolute authority to approve judgments issued by all courts.[36]

Economic Crisis and Vision 2030

Since the early 1970s, oil has been the dominant sector of the Saudi economy. As a result, development and state fiscal policy are closely tied to oil revenues, making the Saudi economy extremely sensitive to fluctuations in the global market, as in 2014, when in June the price of a barrel of oil fell by nearly fifty per cent.[37] The state uses oil rents to finance an expansive network of welfare and social services for the population.[38] Nevertheless, in effect, the reliance on oil as an engine of development has produced misleading outcomes, as nominally high growth rates have not been coupled with any real development. Despite the steady improvement of economic indicators such as GDP growth, per capita income, and inflation rates, the comprehensive development that produces genuine social and political change has been absent.[39]

At the same time, the KSA faces several economic challenges, most importantly its fundamental dependence on oil revenues and the local economy's vulnerability to fluctuations in the global oil market. With growing public expenditures on infrastructure and development programmes, there is a clear need to diversify the economy and revenue streams, and give greater opportunity to the private sector, which in turn represents another important challenge. The government often finds it difficult to rationalise public spending, which is continuously increasing due to several factors, including armed and political conflicts in the region, the high price of imported goods and services, and high population growth, which in turn drives a growing demand for infrastructure and basic services like water, electricity, health, and education. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest population growth rates in the world—2.8 per cent annually—which puts pressure on public services such as housing, health, education, water, electricity, education, and employment.[40]

The economic predicament of oil rentier states becomes readily apparent following any decline in global energy prices, reflected in the balance of payments deficit and low growth rates. Governments of rentier countries are forced to adopt another round of familiar measures, adding tariffs on some goods and services, lifting subsidies on some consumer items such as gasoline, increasing fees and taxes owed to the state, and cutting state employment. Although the Saudi government quickly implemented just such deflationary measures in the wake of the oil price collapse in late 2014, most economists did not expect the measures to resolve the crisis once and for all, speculating that it would likely give the KSA a few more years to withstand volatile oil prices.[41]

In response to the 2014 crisis, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched Saudi Vision 2030 in April 2016, the kingdom's most significant experiment in economic restructuring and economic and social modernisation. Vision 2030 consists of three axes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious homeland. Several programmes were instituted to achieve this vision: the National Transformation Programme, the Housing Programme, the Financial Sector Development Programme, the Quality-of-Life Programme, the Privatisation Programme, the Public Investment Fund Programme, and the Financial Balance Programme. While the plan aims to reduce oil dependence, diversify the economy, and make the private sector an engine of growth, it further pledges greater transparency and public outreach alongside more economic and social liberalisation.[42] Saudi Vision 2030 therefore presents itself not only as an economic development and investment promotion programme, but also as a broader national modernisation project, despite the lack of any direct reference to the political situation, whether in terms of political reform, or security or foreign policy. Economic transformation under Vision 2030 may represent an opportunity to reshape the relationship between the citizen and the state.[43] In recent years, the KSA has been witnessing a long-awaited opening in cultural and social spheres, driven by two factors. Firstly, the old model is no longer economically sustainable; despite the recovery in oil prices, the government cannot still afford the privileges and benefits enjoyed by its twenty million citizens, nor can it sustain its role as the only driving force for continued growth. Secondly, the crown prince saw an opportunity to reduce the burden on the state without bearing a political cost, at least for the time being.[44]

In the context of Vision 2030, the state has undertaken several social and economic reforms. In the social sphere, the role of the religious police has been curtailed, women have been allowed to drive, and cinemas and theatres have been opened.[45] On the economic level, in order to reduce unemployment rates, new rules have been issued that limit specific jobs to citizens and increase the quota of Saudis that companies must employ. To reduce public spending, electricity and water subsidies have been cut, as have the costs of infrastructure projects. Seeking to diversify government revenues, the state imposed a value-added tax of five per cent—later upped to fifteen per cent—along with selective taxes on certain goods, and at the end of 2019, a stake in Saudi Aramco was floated to raise some $29.44 billion. The government has also cracked down on corruption, detaining several businessmen and princes in 2017 on suspicion of corruption. There has been improvement in the investment climate and a strengthening of the private sector, with the state developing foreign investment laws and fostering foreign investment. In February 2021, a decree was issued to prohibit government agencies from contracting with any foreign company or commercial institution with headquarters in a region outside that of the kingdom, starting in 2024. The decree extends to bodies, institutions, and funds affiliated with the government or any of its agencies, although it was stressed that the investments of international corporations without government contracts will not be affected. In fact, the decree has incentivised foreign firms and institutions: in 2020 Saudi Arabia recorded its highest level of foreign investment since 2017, with investments of some $4.7 billion. The decree similarly encourages the employment of Saudi workers, a particular concern as young people make up nearly seventy per cent of the population. Seeking to enhance the role of the private sector, Saudi Arabia has adopted a privatisation strategy as well. Indeed, the Saudi government recently announced an expansion of the privatisation programme within the framework of Vision 2030, saying it expected to raise $55 billion from the programme in the coming years. As part of Vision 2030, the crown prince has also sought to strengthen the tourism sector, especially cultural tourism, recreation, and beach tourism. The kingdom is currently pouring billions of dollars into tourism and entertainment megaprojects, most notably the cities of Neom, Qiddiya, and Amaala. When completed, the projects are expected to generate lucrative returns for the Saudi economy, which in turn will help diversify revenue sources. Since the launch of the National Industrial Development and Logistics Services Programme, the industrial and mining sectors have attracted more than SAR200 billion of private sector investment. The goal is to increase industrial and mineral wealth exports from SAR184 billion in 2019 to SAR424 billion in 2030.[46]

Economic Reforms and Democratisation

The literature on modernisation theory suggests a relationship between democratisation and economic development, linking liberal democracy to economic progress and identifying several economic and social preconditions for successful democratisation. Adam Smith, one of the most important representatives of this trend, considers political liberalism a requisite for the effective functioning of the market and the realisation of freedom. Seymour Lipset also associates political and democratic stability with economic development. This school of thought believes that particular economic and social factors are necessary for democratisation, namely rising economic growth, followed by an increase in per capita income, the expansion of the middle class, and higher levels of education, which increases political participation.[47]

While modernisation theory may have introduced a new approach to the study of democratisation, it has been subject to much criticism on account of its inapplicability to other experiences and contexts, most prominently that of the Gulf region. Despite high economic growth rates and per capita income, and high educational prevalence and attainment, Gulf countries in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular, have not made progress towards democracy. Democratisation is confronted by social, economic, political, and cultural barriers, and, indeed, the literature specifically cites the region’s rentier economy as an obstacle.[48]

Various studies contend that a wealth of natural resources, like oil rents, hinders democratisation and contributes to the establishment and renewal of authoritarianism by which dictatorships are consolidated and maintained. In petrostates, democracy recedes as income rises. Michael Ross asserts that oil-dependent states are inhospitable terrain for the cultivation of democracy, arguing that oil rents encourage government and elite corruption. For him, rentier states' political systems constitute a form of authoritarianism that exploits specific political practices to ensure regime continuity. This behaviour has given rise a set of negative phenomena associated with rents, such as corruption and clientelism, which over time have become tools to perpetuate authoritarianism. In attempting to explain the causal relationship between oil wealth and authoritarianism, Ross explores three mechanisms operating in rentier regimes that bolster authoritarianism and thwart democracy. The first of these is the rentier effect, which may be manifested in three ways: the taxation effect (oil states do not impose heavy taxes on citizens, which frees these states from accountability); the spending effect (high rent income enables the state to increase spending to alleviate social pressure); and the group formation effect (the rentier state uses oil revenues to prevent the emergence of effective, independent civil society organisations). The second causal mechanism is what he terms the repression effect, meaning that the rentier state uses rents to increase spending on security and repressive apparatuses. Thirdly, there is the modernisation effect, meaning that oil revenue does not incentivise governments to bring about the development and change necessary for democracy.[49]

Oil rent also affects state autonomy. The state's access to sizeable financial resources from abroad means that it can dispense with other sources of financing, such as taxes, thus allowing it to act independently of society. This is reflected in individuals' perception of their political rights: citizens become less aggressive in demanding political participation and democracy, prompting the state to expand the scope of authoritarianism and the elite to exercise greater control over politics and the economy, including ownership of the country's economic resources and the deployment of them for its own benefit. In short, ruling elites used natural resources, and oil rents in particular, to control society by buying loyalty, thereby ensuring their own continuity in power and impeding democratic transition.[50] As a result, democratisation fails in rentier states as long as they continue to pursue rentier policies, despite attempts to reform, diversify the economy, and reduce reliance on oil resources.

Insofar as the authoritarian bargain entails citizens ceding their political rights in exchange for economic benefits and gains, it is vulnerable to collapse in the event of poor economic performance and the deterioration of economic resources owned by the ruling authority. This weakness erodes the ability of authoritarian regimes to provide benefits and welfare and secure the loyalty of various political, economic, and military elites. As the bargaining power of authoritarian rulers declines, the opposition grows stronger and elites become prone to factionalism and defections. An economic crisis thus brings with it political crises that may undermine the regime's ability to garner public support based on the provision of economic benefits and advantages, fomenting a climate of instability and uncertainty, and the loss of political legitimacy. To counter this situation, regimes may grant some rights, institute political reforms, and engage in limited political liberalisation, for example by allowing elections, giving more rights to minorities and the opposition, or enacting laws that protect human rights and provide for freedom of expression.[51] In other words, the authoritarian bargain holds as long as the authorities are able to buy citizens' loyalty with economic benefits and privileges, thus ensuring that citizens continue make no claim to political rights. Economic reforms or development plans change nothing; indeed, their objective is to shore up the bargain and perpetuate authoritarianism. The path to democratisation and political change only opens when the regime cannot deliver economic benefits to citizens.

On top of Vision 2030, since 1970 Saudi Arabia has adopted successive five-year economic development plans aimed at reducing dependence on oil revenue and diversifying its productive base.[52] These plans or economic reform attempts have fallen short for several reasons, most notably due to their failure to fundamentally alter the central power dynamic among elites that has precluded genuine economic or political competition. Although much talk has been heard about reform, the state has continued to dominate the economy, picking winners and losers and doling out the shares of each while business elites have continued to rely on their links with the government for profit. Rentierism has permeated most aspects of economic and political life. The long history of reform efforts in the Middle East suggests that real change is impossible without considering the actors who are deeply rooted in the rentier model and benefit from it. Patronage networks cannot be addressed—let alone dismantled—absent structural changes, which requires new relationships between governments and citizens.[53]

While Vision 2030 is an ambitious plan promising structural changes, greater transparency and accountability, citizen participation, and more openness, it has ignored the relationship between economic transformation and the conducive political and social climate it requires. The path of economic reform remains fraught with political risks and will bring significant social changes that may spur negative reactions that could deaccelerate reforms or stop them altogether. Vision 2030 faces numerous political challenges, including:

1. The discontent and antagonism of the ruling family: Under the umbrella of the vision and the fight against corruption, Bin Salman detained princes in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and removed them from important positions in order to concentrate power and influence in the King Salman branch of the family. This fed resentment against Bin Salman and his economic policies, which could mutate into outright opposition that hinders economic development.
2. Popular discontent: Vision 2030's goal of reducing public spending may fuel popular discontent and opposition that could force the government to put a brake on some reforms. When the government lifted subsidies and imposed taxes in September 2016, popular ire forced the government to reinstate allowances to state employees and the military in May 2017.
3. The religious establishment: Over the next decade, the government is looking to increase foreign investment and entertainment in the kingdom, as well as develop non-religious tourism. Such economic and social reforms may generate tensions with conservative forces in the country, which in turn could erode the authority of the clerical establishment, prompting it or some of its leaders to step up their criticism or opposition, with potential adverse implications for political stability.

4. The lack of accountability and transparency: Although the kingdom has embarked on economic reforms, it has not instituted any genuinely effective mechanisms to monitor the performance of the government, which could fuel corruption and undermine economic reforms.[54]

Despite good economic indicators and the plethora and diversity of development plans since 1970, reforms have not changed the political reality. Economic reforms have proved unable to generate social and cultural pressure for a democratic transition, despite high levels of urbanisation and education.[55] The KSA continues to strain under political crises that reflect the political deadlock. The regime is grappling with several persisting crises, some of which have metastasised under King Salman and his crown prince. Most prominent among these crises are the struggles for power and influence within the royal family,[56] the continued economic dependence on oil revenues despite all the reforms and efforts associated with Vision 2030,[57] and the regime's dealings with the Shia population[58] and the opposition and reform advocates, as well as growing opposition at home and abroad.[59]

Overall, the reforms implemented over the years have not induced real structural change. The Saudi political system has remained static from its inception to the enactment of the Basic Law in 1992, and this quasi-constitution does not provide for any popular political participation, accountability, or even separation of powers. Economic structures are dysfunctional, while development plans are vague and have proven unsuccessful at diversifying revenue sources, starting with the first plan in the 1970s down to the present day.[60]

While the state has implemented several economic and social reforms in the context of Vision 2030, it has not adopted an ambitious vision aimed at achieving comprehensive economic change. The state has continued to pursue a set of short-term reform policies that do not offer sustainable solutions to systemic crises. The same rentier policies persist, reflected in the generally unchanged orientation of public policy, which has exacerbated several existing political, economic, and social crises. Economic reforms are largely cosmetic in nature, used by the regime as a tactic to concentrate power in the hands of King Salman and his crown prince and bestow a dubious legitimacy on the regime. Economic reforms have thus failed to bring about change or lay the groundwork for a democratic transition. The most significant indications of this failure are discussed below.

Purging elites and centralising power

After Mohammed bin Salman was named crown prince in 2017, he moved quickly against many of the country's established royal, political, and economic elites who owed their allegiance to the late King Abdullah, taking steps to rein them in while giving a greater role to foreign investors and a politically amorphous youth constituency. In doing so, he sought to reconstitute the elite and weaken the royal family's involvement in power and its control over oil wealth.[61] As part of a sweeping anti-corruption drive, several hundred people were arrested in November 2017 and detained at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. The list of detainees included senior members of the royal family, businessmen, current and former ministers, and media moguls. Among the detainees were Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, a prominent member of the royal family who headed the National Guard; Economy Minister Adel Fakeih; former Finance Minister Ibrahim Assaf; business leaders like Prince Walid bin Talal; and some figures closely associated with the former king. Through the anti-corruption campaign, Mohammed bin Salman sent a message to the country's traditional elites: corruption charges could be selectively deployed against political opponents. The move heightened the concerns of international investors, as the local business community struggled to adapt to the new uncertain environment.[62]

Bin Salman also stripped the sons of the late King Abdullah and their allies of their powers and positions. Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah was sacked as head of the National Guard while Prince Mishaal and Prince Turki were relieved of their gubernatorial positions in Mecca and Riyadh; four of Bin Salman's cousins—sons of Abdullah—were arrested as well.[63] These purges marked a significant shift in the power-sharing arrangement within the royal family. For decades, power within the House of Saud was distributed among a number of senior princes, who passed down their positions to their sons. When making decisions, King Abdullah was often constrained by the perceived need to consult his influential half-brothers, including Salman and Nayef, and he tended to distribute positions of influence and decision-making among the princes. In contrast, King Salman and the crown prince have tended to concentrate power in Salman's line and exclude other princes.[64]

Reforms as a tool for regime maintenance

The perpetuation and stability of power is the main objective of authoritarian regimes. The rulers of these regimes thus seek to consolidate their control over all possible political levers during their tenure, including senior public positions, policymaking centres, and security forces and agencies, and some of them do manage to achieve their aspiration of controlling all levers of the state. Authoritarian rulers live under the constant threat of losing the throne: elites are always lying in wait for the opportunity to seize power, and unrest and protests can morph into uprisings and popular revolutions. For all these reasons, the maintenance of power is a policy priority of authoritarian rulers. In monarchies, elites represent a greater threat. Rulers thus employ various tactics to mitigate the risk from elites and forestall opportunities to remove the rulers from power. To this end, they attempt to preclude any fracturing among elites by preventing the emergence of any alliance among them.[65]

Throughout the previous decades, the rulers of Saudi Arabia have worked to ensure the longevity and stability of monarchical rule; democratisation has not been a goal for any of them. The regime has not sought to build a system governed by laws instead of autocracy, and it has not been concerned with citizens' political participation. Political and economic reforms have been tactically deployed to contain crises and adapt to internal and external conditions, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the regime and ensuring its continuation. Under King Salman, the situation has changed little, as reforms have been employed to exclude the royal family, traditional elites and power centres, and forces loyal to King Abdullah, while investing Salman's rule with new legitimacy.[66]

In fact, Vision 2030 and the limited social reforms instituted do not represent a new proposition, instead they merely recycle ideas and visions from earlier eras. What is new is the way Bin Salman has used these reforms to reshape the power system by destroying other circles of influence within the state, limiting state control to a single sphere of influence, that of King Salman's royal line. Although the reforms spearheaded by Bin Salman have had multiple consequences that do not include comprehensive economic reform or a shift in state fiscal and economic policy, among the most important outcomes is the search for a new model of legitimacy based on promises of economic change and social liberalisation. These promises have given rise to a youth constituency for Bin Salman, lending him public support for his policies. Another outcome of Bin Salman's reforms is the promotion of a new Saudi Arabia that adopts the values of tolerance, openness, and moderation, in contrast to the kingdom's reputation for repression, violence, and killing, especially in the wake of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and in light of the public sphere's closure and restrictions on freedoms.[67]

Continued repression of the opposition

Despite the marketing of a new Saudi Arabia that adopts the values of openness and tolerance, the state continues to pursue draconian security policies against opponents and advocates of reform, including arrests, harassment, and assassinations.

The authorities habitually harass opponents. In a show of authoritarian power, the government detained hundreds of the country's richest and most prominent businessmen and senior government officials for weeks in Riyadh, accusing them of corruption. Instead of relying on courts and the rule of law, the authorities chose to detain the suspects using an opaque process, squandering the opportunity to build and strengthen a legal framework that addresses corruption.[68] In May 2018, a widespread arrest campaign targeting prominent women activists, their lawyers, and many of their supporters began just a few weeks before the decades-long ban on women driving was lifted.[69]

The crackdown on dissidents has also reached unprecedented levels since King Salman assumed the throne. He began consolidating his power by side-lining powerful royal figures, monopolising decision-making, and silencing opposition voices, including those of prominent activists, clerics, senior members of the royal family, and even dissidents abroad. His aggressive approach has fuelled opposition to the regime from individuals and movements both at home and abroad. Saudi authorities have even hounded opponents who have fled the country, kidnapping and killing several dissidents abroad in mysterious circumstances, the most notorious case being the brutal killing of Jamal Khashoggi. These draconian practices have rendered Mohammed bin Salman a criminal trying to polish his image by bestowing largesse and Westernising Saudi Arabia. Other opponents have been intimidated into silence.[70] The regime has also stepped up digital surveillance, closely monitoring social media and prosecuting ordinary citizens for expressing their views online, while courts have handed down lengthy sentences to women opposed to state policies.[71]

While previous monarchs were hostile to opponents, none of them of them were as repressive as Mohammed bin Salman. Though the legitimacy of the opposition has never been recognised, in previous eras royal amnesties were periodically issued for dissidents abroad, as when King Khalid and King Fahd acceded to the throne.[72]

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the impact of Vision 2030 on democratic transition in Saudi Arabia, asking: Does Vision 2030 advance the process of democratisation? Adopted in the wake of the 2014 crisis, the vision aims to bring about structural economic changes in the Saudi economy. To conceptualise and frame the relationship between economic reform and democratisation, the paper relied on theories of democratic transition, the rentier state, and the authoritarian bargain, adopting a descriptive analytical approach to examine the relationship between the Saudi economy and the political system. The study concludes that while Vision 2030 promises more transparency, accountability, citizen engagement, and a degree of economic and social liberalisation—which could potentially reconfigure the relationship between citizens and the state and reshape the political system in the long term—to date, it has led to no concrete economic or social changes. The paper further concludes that economic reform serves various purposes for the Saudi political regime. Most importantly, it acts to contain political crises, build new legitimacy at home and abroad based on economic development and openness, and improve the regime's image abroad, especially after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The reforms have also shored up the absolute monarchy, concentrating power in the hands of King Salman and the crown prince, while excluding princes who previously controlled various centres of influence within the royal family and replacing traditional elites loyal to King Abdullah with new elites who support the policies of Mohammed bin Salman. These economic reforms thus do not ultimately promote democratisation. This is further evidenced by three indicators discussed in the study: reforms aimed at the consolidation and perpetuation of the political system, the continued repression of dissidents and reform advocates, and the moves taken to reconstitute the elite class and centralise power.

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